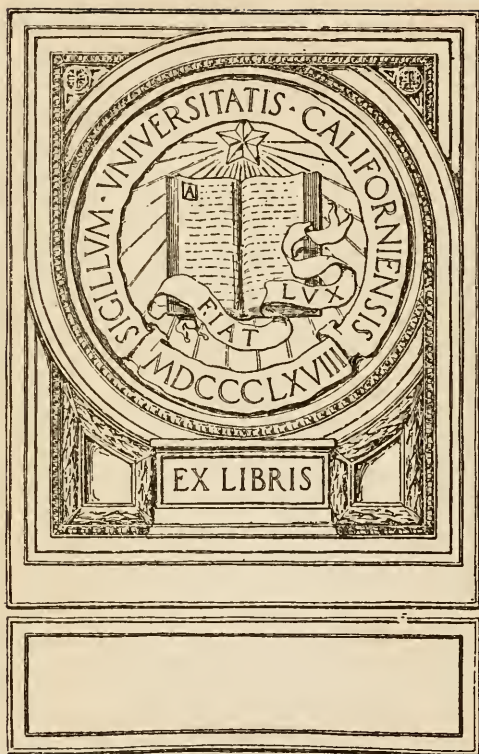


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A LADY OF LEISURE



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A LADY OF LEISURE.

BY
ETHEL SIDGWICK

AUTHOR OF "PROMISE," "HERSELF," "SUCCESSION," ETC.



BOSTON
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TO THE
AUTHOR

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1914
MAIN

TO MY MOTHER
THIS ROMANCE OF YOUTH
IS DEDICATED

424628

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PART I
GLASSWELL

A LADY OF LEISURE

I

THE RECTORY

GLASSWELL is thirty miles out of London, in what the occupants of Glasswell Rectory called the Dickens direction. Annotated for the ignorant, this means that Glasswell is in Kent. Those sentimentalists, chiefly foreign and transatlantic, who still delight to honour our greatest imaginative writer, and divert themselves yearly by visiting his shrines, nearly always discovered Glasswell sooner or later in their wanderings, and frequently took a meal at the Rectory; for it was an unusually open house to strangers, with a "show" garden attached. Also the Rector's first wife had been a Dickens-lover, and he had imbibed a large measure of her tastes.

On a certain day of late spring or early summer — the Rector's double-cherry blossoms were brown, if that conveys any evidence upon the question — Miss Lois Lennox plodded to the Rectory to call on her old friend Mrs. Gibbs. This was the second Mrs. Gibbs, a person of much less romantic proclivities

than the younger one, who many years before had spouted *Pickwick* to her husband in preference to Scripture texts; and she was quite lately installed as a bride in her new home. Miss Lennox came to see her for two reasons: firstly, she was spending a few days in the neighbourhood, and had a natural curiosity to realise her friend's surroundings; and secondly because Mrs. Gibbs had promised to be useful to her in her new capacity, and was fulfilling the obligation with great promptitude, according to her wont. The note which Miss Lennox carried in her bag may be offered complete to the world in illustration.

“MY DEAR LOIS,

“Certainly come Friday towards tea-time, it will suit. I will keep my husband in if possible, but you know his ways. I think I have just the thing for you, but I cannot be sure. My stepdaughter Margery is visiting at her uncle Dr. Ashwin's house in London, and she writes that the Ashwin girl is looking for a job. Whether the sort of girl will suit the sort of work of course I cannot say, having no first-hand evidence. You had better hear Margery's report when you come, and talk to Maud. They are both thoroughly sensible girls.

“Your affectionate friend,

“HENRIETTA GIBBS.”

The back of the sheet contained directions, necessarily complicated, for reaching the house, which was why Miss Lennox had retained it. The recurrence of the word "girl" on the face of it was pleasing to her sympathetic mind; for her old friend had a gift for the management of girlhood, and fate had only granted her, by her former marriage, a single son. Now, with two step-daughters, both of the interesting age and reported pretty, it was evident her natural talents would be well bestowed.

As for Miss Ashwin, the young relative referred to, Miss Lennox was in doubt, for she had met the name, and had certain mental connections with it that were unpromising. She was inclined to doubt everything, poor woman, that promised at all well for her advantage: wherefore it was delightful to depend, in whatever degree, on dear Henrietta's advice again. Miss Lennox had been hardly used by fate, and was visibly battered by the necessary resistance. The partner who had been the inspiration of her little dressmaking establishment at Battersea had lately married and migrated to India. Nobody but Miss Lennox thought the partner herself much loss, but, even in Mrs. Gibbs' cool judgment, her credit was, and her capital. Wanting the partner and her purse, Miss Lennox felt lonely and unstable; and looking about her, she dreamed

of a nice girl with money whom she could instruct. Now, a niece of the Reverend Arthur Gibbs could hardly be other than nice, and a daughter of Dr. Claude Ashwin must necessarily be wealthy. It seemed a heaven-sent opportunity,—and yet it seemed to fall almost too aptly with Miss Lennox's desires to be attainable. This was her state, a not uncommon state of patient depression and humility, when she arrived at the Rectory gates.

Not long after she had passed them, owing to the atmosphere of unhampered ease in the pleasant house, and the impression made by Henrietta's cheerful looks and strong accustomed tones, Miss Lennox began to feel more hopeful. Henrietta's new circumstances,—most thoroughly deserved, too,—seemed ideal, and Miss Lennox commonly found her happiness, *faute de mieux*, in that of others. Having seen the house from top to bottom, and rather involved herself in its indiscriminate praises, she was conducted to the drawing-room, and introduced to Miss Gibbs, the Maud of the letter, a quiet-mannered, pretty-for-all-practical-purposes girl of five-and-twenty, and re-introduced to Charles Shovell, Henrietta's own son, who was reclining languidly on the low window-seat of the long room. Miss Lennox had not enquired much about this young gentleman in latter years, having vaguely gathered that he was "unsatisfactory," and being

exquisitely timid, especially with Henrietta, of trespassing on painful ground. It was rather comforting, on the whole, to find him looking very personable and prosperous, installed with a number of magazines among innumerable cushions, and being evidently pampered extremely by his step-sister Maud.

During the consumption of tea and strawberries, — at which daily duty Mr. Shovell shone, — passages from Margery's letters concerning Miss Ashwin and her projects were read aloud, and Miss Lennox's tired spirits rose a little more, for Margery was evidently a nice girl too, and the letters lively reading.

"In my opinion," Mrs. Gibbs commented on the reading to her friend, "if the child really wants work, she couldn't be in better hands. I should think her mother would be relieved."

"Oh, Mamma," expostulated Maud. "Aunt Evie does not care a snap what Violet does. It's Violet herself I am thinking about, — and Margery too —"

"Personally —" said Charles from the window-corner where he was being temporarily neglected.

"Oh, we all know what Charlie thinks," Maud intervened with a sisterly laugh.

"Personally," said Charles, his dreamy monotone

a trifle more incisive, "I can answer for Miss Ashwin's not being offended by the proposal."

"Offended?" cried Maud. "She made it herself." And his mother said, "My good Charles!"

"She is not easily offended," said Charles, looking over Miss Lennox's head, "or Margery and Maud and their father and my mother, holding prayer-meetings perpetually over her in the drawing-room, would long since have been definitely resented. Her own mother is more tactful ——"

"Aunt Evie tactful!" ejaculated Maud.

"More tactful," pursued the patient Charles, "because knowing her daughter, and respecting her impulses, even though she may not always understand them, she holds off, and lets Miss Ashwin be sole judge in the things that concern her solely."

Having concluded this peroration in triumph, he resumed his tea. Maud laughed openly at him, and Mrs. Gibbs herself joined in the laugh, though she seemed vexed.

"You would really think," she addressed the visitor, "wouldn't you, Lois, that Charles was a close connection of these Ashwins, and Maud and Margery had no claim to speak on the subject. Whereas the contrary is the case. Charles has met the girl three times ——"

"Twice," said Charles gravely.

"Twice,— the second time between trains, as I

happen to remember. And he has never set eyes on the mother at all."

"I did," said Charles. "I saw her hat."

"Which doubtless gives you the right to patronise her parental methods."

Mrs. Gibbs spoke in a bracing manner to which Charles was well used. He only drooped a trifle more, and sought for a more happy theme out of the neighbouring window.

"The new gardener," he announced, "is among the peas, studying the governor's little wind-mills. He has a remarkably fine profile, well-defined at this moment against the western sky. If you will come exactly here, Maud ——"

But nobody wanted to take up the diversion, as it happened. The Ashwins were a most fascinating subject, and Miss Lennox had been by many degrees more interested in her old friend's new family, on learning of the connection.

"But do tell me," she said, strenuously sympathetic, to Maud. "Of course, one has heard of Mrs. Ashwin. I had no idea she was a relation of yours, Miss Gibbs."

"For our sins," said Maud, looking down, for she was shy. "She is rather an overpowering personage, you know. As you see, her hat was enough for Charlie. My uncle has titled patients by the string,

but she crushes them all. She beats everybody in London — except Violet.”

“Is your cousin uncrushable then?” said Mrs. Gibbs.

“Well, at least by worldly splendour. Aunt Evie is acutely worldly; and that’s where Violet scores. Isn’t it, Charlie, dear?”

She looked towards her stepbrother, who smiled a mystic smile. Charles could do this capitally, having adaptable features and far-sighted eyes. The smile implied that he could have found far better language in which to present Miss Ashwin’s circumstances to a heartless world, if he had been allowed by fate and his mother to attempt it. As it was, he smiled at the view in conscious superiority, and watched the distant gardener, an object of interest to Charles, since he was new. Miss Lennox was new, of course; but Charles hardly thought she would repay much study. She was known to his mother by her Christian name, refused cream with her strawberries, and wore drabby, tender-coloured clothes, the clothes of an æsthetic female of the last generation: so Charles preferred to let her remain an abstraction, not a fact. Now, the gardener was a handsome fellow, and looked unusual. He promised interesting combinations and possibilities in the near future, not unfathomable to a young man who, from various ambushes in the house and

grounds, might have him in view during the whole of the long vacation.

Life, it may just be mentioned to cheer the reader, was sweet to Charles. He had for weeks past been coming to the conclusion that his mother, whose success in life had hitherto been clearer to her than to himself, had fallen into a soft place at Glasswell Rectory, and that holidays of unusual comfort stretched before him. He was not at least to be hurried away to frowzy hotels in foreign places for the good of his accent; nor was he bracingly encouraged to seek invitations to the houses of profitable friends. Those devices were things of the past. His mother, a recent bride, and a stranger like himself, was happily inclined to keep quiet and to let him be; and he could lie on deck-chairs, compare abstractions with realities, and relish life, according to his private taste.

Yet, as things turned out, he was unable to let his family flounder for ever on the subject they had chosen, without at least one more effort to put them straight. Unfortunately for Mr. Shovell's dignity, he always had the most irresistible impulse to talk when he most longed to be aloof and superior. For instance, when Miss Lennox observed too gaily that she was getting quite curious about the girl, Charles said, "You will remain so,"—very definitely; and the family, who had forgotten him, jumped.

Maud, feeling the comment was rude, explained it away.

"Charlie thinks her rather supernatural, you know," she said to Miss Lennox. "But she is not, dear thing, the least."

"What is she?" said Miss Lennox.

"Indefinable, obviously," said Mrs. Gibbs, in the pause. "Come now, Maud," she encouraged the girl. "Let us hear you paint a character."

"Margery tried to paint a rainbow last week," murmured Charles, "but the rainbow faded before she matched the green."

"Don't!" the girl said, laughing. The combined stimulating gaze of her stepmother and Miss Lennox disconcerted her. "Violet," she began, with an effort, "is very pretty — and retiring ——"

"Like her name," Miss Lennox smiled.

"No; not modest,— nor reserved even, because she can talk, can't she, Charlie?"

"Fire and dew," said Charles.

"Oh, dear, isn't he tiresome? Why don't you tell Miss Lennox yourself, if you're so eloquent?"

"Miss Lennox is concerned with her practical qualities," said Mrs. Gibbs rather dryly. "No one wants fire and dew in a workshop; it would rust the needles." She looked surprised as they laughed. Mrs. Gibbs had dealt largely with young females in a quasi-professional capacity, and she found it hard

to believe that her husband's niece was an exception to ordinary laws, though she knew little of her beyond what she gathered at intervals from Arthur and the girls. But she suspended judgment on principle until she had studied Violet Ashwin on her own merits, apart from her rather disconcerting parents. The elder Ashwins, far from being undefinable, seemed to her acute judgment simple enough. She wondered they should interest gossip as much as they did, for she was sure she could match them both by the dozen in London, and probably their daughter too. She was rather amused by what she privately considered her step-daughters' "airs" on the subject of this connection; but though naturally downright and penetrating, a life of varied trouble had taught her patience, and had given her at least a fair imitation of that much-vaunted commodity, natural tact.

In short, Mrs. Gibbs waited; and knitted a stocking for Charles to fill up time.

"Is she thorough?" asked Miss Lennox. "Does she go through with things, I mean, Miss Gibbs?"

"She goes to the back of them," said Charles.

"Yes,—well, it's true," said Maud. "She might seem to take up things rather at random, Miss Lennox; but everything, in her hands, comes out the same. She makes them herself, if you understand."

"It's not luminous," said Mrs. Gibbs, knitting.

Miss Lennox set her lips oddly, for she possessed a sense of humour.

"I don't know why I gathered from your note," she said to her friend, "that the girl might not be serious,—quite serious,—in her desire to work: that she might be just one of the parrot-set, I mean, who follow the fashion and repeat the cry."

"Which cry?" said Charles.

"The toilers' and spinners'," said his mother crisply. "You would hardly have noticed it, my dear; but it has been about the world, though not perhaps at Cambridge."

"Oh, yes, yes," said Charles tolerantly. "I only didn't know they cried."

"They don't if they are genuine spinners, Mr. Shovell," said Miss Lennox. "And little Miss Ashwin is quite in earnest, I gather. She really *wants* to be a dressmaker."

The point, thus baldly stated, was effective at least. It drew them instantaneously, all.

"Violet will make the most lovely dresses," said Maud warmly. "Those she designs for herself and her mother are dreams."

"Her work is neat enough," admitted Mrs. Gibbs, who had seen specimens among her new possessions. "Neat, if a trifle meticulous. She is not a common incapable, Lois, anyhow."

"Don't let her prick her finger," said Charles.

A pause succeeded this remark, which, intensely as it was uttered, in its apparent imbecility cut Miss Lennox adrift again. Young Mr. Shovell was really too silly, she thought, and a couple of sensible women such as these might stamp on him. But his mother, rearranging the tea-cups, appeared to hear nothing, and Maud sat smiling as though the allusion was clear to her. So Miss Lennox (who had forgotten her fairy-tales) regretfully decided that, Rector or none, she had better go. Miss Ashwin herself, she learnt from Henrietta, was expected with her father at Glasswell on Sunday, and she would be able, being kindly asked to join the party, to do business directly with the doctor, and have the benefit of a clergyman's counsel too. That was the greatest boon in store, though Dr. Ashwin, something of a celebrity, was interesting. Mr. Gibbs had long ago had charge of the parish where Miss Lennox worked at Battersea, and he had since loomed god-like in Miss Lennox's eyes. Mr. Gibbs, it may be mentioned, was rather wasted on the part, for almost any pastor would have served as well.

She would have liked to have a few final words with Henrietta alone; but as things emerged, she was fated to be seen out by Charles, who always, if mechanically, did the correct thing. When he ceased lounging and stood upright, he was a handsome and graceful youth; but Miss Lennox, deeply concerned

about serious questions, was singularly unobservant of exteriors.

"Can you really see Mrs. Ashwin's daughter at Battersea?" she demanded of her escort on the doorstep, hoping to jolt him, as it were, into the truth.

"Battersea," said Charles, and his vague eyes came to rest upon her. "Oh yes, it makes little difference. I saw her the second time at Bletchley, on the bridge."

"Her heart's not in Harley Street," was his final observation, offered as the abstraction called Lennox retreated down the steps. It may have been kindly meant to reassure her, but it sounded more like the refrain of a song.

II

THE FAMILY

"You would really think Charles desired to be thought half-witted," remarked Mrs. Gibbs, when, finding her son had no intention of returning to the drawing-room, she bade Maud shut the door.

She spoke soberly, and with perfect self-command; for though Charles was a thorn in the side that pricked her constantly, she was not at all the woman to lay herself out for casual sympathy. She was confiding in Arthur's girls by degrees, as their sterling qualities became apparent to her: and she thought that in time she would make a friend of Maud; but she wished to let them get over the first fascination of the uncomfortable Charles before she started.

To her own mind, he was the one weak point of her strong position at Glasswell Rectory, now of some five months' establishment. She had made apologies for him once and for all to Arthur, before she intruded her son upon his household, as a piece of property which she could not defend, but of which she saw no immediate prospect of getting rid. She

had warned Arthur that Charles would criticise everything, and be entirely useless in parish, house, or grounds. She had warned the girls,—Maud, that is, since Margery was the danger,—that he would probably fall in love with them, but they had better take no notice.

Neither of her prophecies had come to pass; for, firstly, Charles had been evidently impressed by his stepfather's personality and social ideals, and knew every child in the village by name at the end of the first week; and secondly, far from being the object of his fruitless sighs, Maud and Margery promptly fell in love with him: interrupted their useful occupations to listen to his airy rhapsodies, and showed him off to all their acquaintance with the pride of girls who had never had a brother, or studied a youth of his class at closer quarters than across a drawing-room.

They were good, shy, earnest young women; and their excitement over this new acquisition of theirs, during the first weeks that succeeded their step-mother's home-coming, was so naïvely apparent, that there was serious danger of Mr. Shovell's being finally and flatly spoiled. But, providentially for all concerned, Charles was thinking of higher things; and his vague eyes seemed hardly to notice them,—or at least Maud. Margery fell under his gaze occasionally, and more than once he condescended

to intimate speech with her. But it was not her handsome exterior that attracted him, nor even her handsomely stored mind, for on each occasion his subject in these interviews had been Margery's cousin Violet, in whose remote existence, in her fairy palace in London, his state of rapt interest was such that Margery began to suspect he had encouraged his mother in her new connection solely in order to get nearer to the girl. Charles, for all his grumbling at his mother's methods, and for all her vigorous treatment of him, had such an air of managing her and the world to his liking, that Margery thought it not impossible; and she imparted the private conviction to her sister, over hair-dressing, in the seclusion of their common room.

"Is he in love with Violet?" asked Maud.

"Oh no," laughed Margery. "You mustn't even suggest it, darling. It was all by moonlight, don't you see? I think he confused her with the moon."

They laughed: but their laughter was directed at Charles, not at Violet, to whose moonbeam qualities her cousins gave their due. Even to her own sex, Violet was thrilling; and Margery in particular, the contemporary and chosen confidante, was her sworn adherent. It is true the adherence had to be manifested largely on paper, for though the Rectory girls lived but an hour from a London terminus, and were Miss Ashwin's most immediate kinswomen, they saw

her in the life very seldom: for reasons which only a closer acquaintance with the circumstances of both families could make apparent to the enquirer.

Their mother, the first Margaret, who died when Margery was ten, had been Dr. Claude Ashwin's only sister, almost of his age, and closely bound to him. Claude's marriage had been a passionate though private grief to Mrs. Gibbs; and her deep disappointment, and painful though resigned renunciation of her favourite brother, had passed by reflection, as it were, to the girls. Maud especially guarded the inherited grudge against "Aunt Evie," who, contrary to the advice of her exclusive inner ring, had known her own business so well as to ensnare the rising doctor, and having caught, to cling to her prey. It was thus Margaret Gibbs had thought of the transaction, the preliminary stages of which had passed beneath her eyes. After one determined effort to outwit the ensnarer and save Claude, she gave in to superior guile, and accepted the inevitable, to all appearance, easily. She attended the wedding with little Maud, witnessed Claude's evident infatuation with a sisterly smile, and performed fastidiously, to the end of her life, her own part of the social exchange with the wealthier house in Harley Street. She never consciously let slip an ill-natured word on the subject, above all in the presence of the children; yet, as has been indi-

cated, something of the dryness of her private judgment had passed to her elder daughter. Margery, gayer by temperament, and seven years younger, had shaken herself free of the grudge a little. Margery was her father's girl, and had absorbed a measure of his tolerant admiration for Eveleen, as for some exotic bird of brilliant plumage that had settled at the limits of the Rectory garden, and which it pleased the Rector's simple heart to watch from time to time.

Eveleen "knew her business," Mr. Gibbs explained, though he did not define exactly what that business was. The independent celebrity to which she attained, parallel with Claude's, as it were, and as though competing with him, amused the Rector persistently to contemplate. His occasional manner of reading aloud, at the rectorial breakfast-table, scraps of society gossip in the papers that referred to her, was slightly shocking to earnest-minded visitors, and decidedly puzzling to the strong-minded lady who now sat at the head of his board.

"Can't you see her?" Mr. Gibbs would say, looking about him for sympathy, having extracted something quite unnecessarily frivolous about Mrs. Claude Ashwin, in a setting of mauve orchids and diamonds, for the delectation of his family. "The diamonds were real, too; few but gene-wine,—

weren't they?" And Margery would laugh and uphold him amid the general disapproval.

It was an attitude his first wife had encouraged; he and Margaret had long since agreed, for want of better opportunity, to treat the Ashwin *ménage* in this charitably rallying vein. Claude himself was far too good a man, and too old a friend, to be ignored or condemned, still less sentimentally compassionated. At the moment of mating he had chosen strangely, but there was a strange element in his composition, as there had been in his sister's, and none admitted the fact more freely than Mr. Gibbs. Mr. Gibbs judged men by their records; and Claude Ashwin's record, daring and dazzling as were the attainments scored,—“indecently successful,” as Margaret had said of him,—included a solid basis of serviceable work. Beneath the man of fashion and the scientist he was conscientious and generous, just as Margaret had been; and the Rector, having marked down these essential qualities, excused his restlessness, overlooked his somewhat erratic scintillations in dialogue, and allowed him as many contradictory poses as he cared to assume. The Rector had loved his Margaret earnestly, and learnt her carefully, and by the time of her death he had got far enough in the study to comprehend many things in her brother also, which he could not naturally have comprehended. Her death, indeed, had left

him curious, and he would gladly have pursued Claude's acquaintance, if only to satiate the curiosity, had fate and their respective lives — and wives — allowed it. But there lay the difficulty, a natural barrier, which his simplicity never overstepped.

Eveleen, since the day of her marriage, never sent a glance of encouragement in the direction of Claude's sister's family. She had not stirred a finger to bridge the gap across which Margaret's skilled acting, and tireless activity, had thrown so many tentative communications. At her sister-in-law's death, urged in part, no doubt, by immediate jealousy of Claude's overmastering grief, she had kicked the last strand of intimacy with the Gibbsses, as it were, away: refused to attend the funeral, and neglected even the decent garb of sympathy she might have assumed by writing to the girls. Her behaviour marked a definite attitude, in short, which she had never been at the pains to mark before; and Mr. Gibbs, who had known something of her in life, and yet more of her through Margaret, acquiesced in it, though for the sake of her husband and daughter, regretfully.

Mr. Gibbs for his part had re-married, after some seven years, deliberately and without a scruple. Margaret had told him to do so, and he generally took Margaret's advice in the end: but it was some

time before he found the woman with whom he could associate comfortably, after her. In the interval, he moved out of town into the country, where a fat living was offered him, which he accepted for his children's sake. He much preferred the city work himself, but he was informed by Maud that he was growing too old for it, and, shaking his head sadly, he submitted. Cheered by Margery on the way down to Glasswell, he began to have an idea that the country might prove interesting, and so it did. He discovered deep within himself a gardener and a farmer, and while he pottered among his pigs and his peas, he began to wonder why Margaret, with all her psychological penetration, had never planted him in the country before. Within a year of settling in Glasswell he found himself so happy that he became ashamed: and rising up, he looked about him for stimulating obligations.

As soon as he looked, he discovered he was a parent, and obligations swarmed upon him. Maud and Margery, those charming and sensible companions, were grown girls and of an age to marry: and he was selfishly detaining them at his side. From the moment he began to envisage them as young women, he made discoveries like thunder-claps. Out of his own company, they were shy with men; they saw nobody for months together but one another,—they were prim even with the curate.

They refused invitations on the plea that they were too busy,—too busy with his, Arthur Gibbs' work! Maud was concealing housewife's worries, and looking worn beneath the eyes. Margery, returned from boarding-school, was settling in a dreadful contentment to her painting of the village children, and the care of fowls,—a healthy, clever girl who might be at college, breaking the soft hearts of her unwary tutors, just as Margaret Ashwin had long since broken the Rector's. It was all as bad as it could be,—terrible. Such a state of things must be most summarily changed.

So the Rector, who was popular with all his women parishioners, past and present, went to town to call on a former one, Mrs. Shovell, whom he had known in his first parish. She was a woman of good provincial family herself, the relict of a younger son, who had been through rather ghastly misfortunes as a young married woman, and whom Margaret had subsequently seconded in a vigorous struggle for her livelihood, and the health of a young child. Having seen her feet safely on the road, the busy clerical pair had lost her, and it was by a chance that Mr. Gibbs had re-discovered her, established and prosperous, as the head of a hostel for girls in a good quarter of the town. Mrs. Shovell had speculated astutely on a tendency she had marked, the rising flood of independent young womanhood; and being

well-bred and most painfully experienced, was able to advise them. She had useful connections, and made herself a good position. She sent her boy to school and college in triumph, and travelled with him in the holidays. She and her benefactor Mr. Gibbs met again on the warm terms of mutual congratulation. They revived pleasant memories of Margaret and the little girls, settled, since Mrs. Shovell would have it so, a very ancient debt, and could look calmly, from much the same standpoint of dearly-won experience, upon life's present complications. It was one easy slide, for the Rector's optimistic nature, from these terms to matrimony. The understanding was frank: it was simply an alliance of friendly forces for mutual good, and was regarded by both sides as such; and the younger generation was happily in each case of such amiable temper, that the clash was less than is apt to be foretold by the more suspicious critics of such unions.

"Mamma is quite nice," Maud wrote quietly to an old school-fellow, "and has not upset more than you would expect in a house like this. Of course, we see much less of Papa than we did. . . . Margery is to go to Cambridge in the autumn, and Mamma has let me be what I have long wanted to become, a proper accountant to Papa for the farm. I have been certain for ages that we were wasting money, and Mamma agrees with me, and has made

him see reason. I am thankful to be really useful to him in a way I like at last."

"Charlie is the funniest dear," announced Margery the artist to an enquiring comrade of the brush, "with blue, sleepy-looking eyes, and a haycock of hair, and an absolutely perfect nose like a Gainsborough portrait. When he attends at all to what you say he looks surprised. He does not mind being drawn the least, so long as he can smoke. I never tried a man before, and it is thrilling. He seems quite to have taken to Papa, and tells us remarkable things about Cambridge after dinner, which cannot all be true. . . . Things are certainly more lively at Glasswell since they came."

"There are two girls here," Charles warned Robert Brading, a Cambridge friend he asked to tennis. "They seem rather diffident creatures, but they enjoy tobacco: and though they laugh too much, they have stopped following me about. They both begin with M, the tall one finishing -argery, and the short one -aud. Owing to the respective length of their bodies, I find it easy to remember. Their father is a soul-saver of the genial kind, a very grand old buffer; and he has lately been married by my mother for his good."

These naïve confessions best prove the fact that, where many such artificially constructed households creak, that at Glasswell produced a harmony not un-

pleasing to the ear; but how much of this happy accord of chance materials was owing to the Rector himself,— since nobody on the spot discovered — we must leave the Rector's critics at their own leisure to decide.

III

THE RECTOR

It had not occurred to the new Mrs. Gibbs that her one weak spot, her intense though contained anxiety about Charles, would make her more, not less, open to the sympathy of the "maidens," as the Rector called his girls. As a fact, the natural maternal weakness appealed, at least to Maud, more than all the strong armament of her virtues. And when she now, on Charles' departure from the drawing-room, betrayed her dread of his being thought, by the casual visitor, half-witted, Maud roused with promptitude to his defense, and her support.

"Nobody really minds," said Maud. "Perhaps it's only the Cambridge way to talk like that."

"Oh, I acquit Cambridge," said Mrs. Gibbs.

"He was reading his German book this morning," said Maud, "though he did not want me to see. I expect," she proceeded, gathering courage, "that now Violet has determined to adopt a career, Charlie will also discover the necessity."

"Humph," said Mrs. Gibbs. She laid down her

knitting, and thought it out. "Then, as his mother," she said, "I may trust, my dear, either that Violet's somewhat visionary influence may fail altogether, or that, when the moment comes for her to go off at a tangent, Charles may not go off at a tangent in imitation."

"Wait till you see her," said Maud, with perfect good temper. "You will not be surprised at Charlie, any more than we are, really."

"You forget I have seen your cousin," said Mrs. Gibbs. "I was with Charles when they met."

"At Bletchley, on the bridge?" Maud enquired. "Or by moonlight, near the Backs?"

"Both occasions, presumably," said Mrs. Gibbs. "That is, I was present officially at all the picnics in which Charles took part that week; though I daresay I did not distinguish one girl from another. But at the station I absolutely spoke to her. We were thrown against her as we crossed the line. She had got separated from her party, and seemed to be either ignorant or indifferent about her train. We happened to be in a hurry to catch ours, so I did not stay long."

"Who was with her?" said Maud.

"Her mother, whom she pointed out to Charles, was engaged in a *tête-à-tête* below us."

"Oh,— was Uncle Claude there, then?"

"No, my dear,— another gentleman. I really for-

get what name your cousin mentioned, but it had a handle to it."

"Then," said Maud, with decision, "Violet had not got separated. She was hovering on the bridge out of delicacy."

"Possibly," said Mrs. Gibbs, and seized her knitting again. "Disgraceful, a girl of that age," she muttered. "No wonder she flirts herself, when she gets an opportunity."

"Oh, Mamma!" cried Maud. "Violet flirt! *What* a good thing Charlie did not hear you!"

"You mean to say ——" said Mrs. Gibbs, but stopped as a large form darkened the drawing-room window. "Oh, what a pity, Arthur," she changed the issue, "Lois Lennox has been here for nearly two hours, hoping to see you. She had to be back by half-past six."

"Really?" said the Rector. "I say, how's that?" He extended a particularly fine pea-pod, slightly ragged at one edge. "The hawfinches again, hey? I shall have to get a gun."

"No, you won't, Papa," said Maud. "The hawfinches know you."

"Lois is in trouble," said Mrs. Gibbs.

"Hey?" said the Rector, laying down the pea-pod. The lines of his cheerful face changed slightly, but the second expression was quite as attractive as the first. "I thought she was out of the wood."

"She's lost clients since that selfish woman went," his wife explained. "She must have someone to join her, that's a fact. She wants capital."

"Everybody wants capital," said Mr. Gibbs, and his eyes fell wistfully on the pea-pod an instant.

"Imagine," said Mrs. Gibbs. "Lois made the partner's whole trousseau for nothing, and only a girl to help. Something like fifty pounds' worth, probably, in trimmings and trouble. I cannot see why simply getting married should make people so inconsiderate. Lois loses enough by her going without that. A bride of thirty, too."

"It excites them more, at thirty," suggested the Rector. "A greater upset to the mind."

"Well," said Mrs. Gibbs, "I was married at twenty-one, and again at forty-five, and I believe I kept my senses the second time as well as the first."

"Indubitably," said the Rector. As she did not look up, he winked at Maud, for he liked to share a joke. However, Miss Lennox's affairs had taken possession of his mind, and he began to turn them over.

"What about Maud?" he said suddenly. "She would be handy with linings and things; and Miss Lennox is nice company. Besides — young women — London town ——" He looked hopefully at Maud. She had assured him fifty times that she detested London visits, but he never could digest the unsuitable fact.

"And my capital, Papa?" was all she said.

"Oh," said the Rector. "Well, we might manage something." He scratched his jaw and looked at the pea-pod.

"Extra large peas," mocked Maud. "Warranted Church of England, a penny each."

"Peas with a taste of q's in them," said the Rector. "No, it won't quite do. She has advertised, Henrietta, I suppose?"

"She does not want to advertise. She particularly wants a lady, a person of decided character, she said, and yet rather more sympathetic than Miss Moffat used to be, not too old or ugly, with original ideas and an eye for colour,—and psychological insight above all."

"Good gracious!" said the Rector, impressed. "Is that necessary?"

"Quite necessary," said Maud. "Miss Lennox explained that so many of her clients live at Kensington and Chelsea, and that though they are interesting, you have to adapt yourself."

"Do you? Then what about the decision of character?"

"They often have not the least idea what they really want," said Maud.

"Humph! And money into the bargain." The Rector pondered. "I begin to think, ladies, the paragon will be harder to find."

"We thought of Violet," said his wife, after a pause.

Mr. Gibbs' face changed, lengthened, and then relaxed completely.

"Violet? Ha, ha! Violet and Miss Lennox!" He swung towards Maud. "Which of you maidens thought of that?"

"Why not as much as me and Miss Lennox?" said Maud, demurely. "She is such nice company."

"No, but really!" protested the Rector. "Violet among the Chelsea blue dragons,— fagging for them, — pinning up their tails! Claude would never see it, you know. Your uncle would never see it, Maud."

"She wants to be useful," said Mrs. Gibbs. "I understood."

"Gracefully useful," said the Rector, gesticulating, "gracefully. Claude's an exquisite, you know, — was so long before the duchesses got hold of him. And Eveleen — oh, ye little fishes! 'Think of her!'"

"I do," said Mrs. Gibbs, with emphasis. "I should not wonder if the child was better out of the house, for her own sake. I was saying so to Maud. Lois, say what you like, Arthur, is a thorough lady, and an able woman as well."

"To be sure," said Mr. Gibbs, turning grave. "Oh, to be sure." But his eyes still dwelt on the fancy picture of Eveleen, wistfully. "Miss Lennox is a fine creature,— charitable too. She is capable of

charity. She took in that girl whose mother drank — Alice something-or-other; apprenticed her on spec, don't you remember?"

He appealed, in absence of mind, to Mrs. Gibbs. Then, recollecting that she had nothing to do with his former parish on the Surrey side, diverted his eyes to Maud, who nodded.

"A handsome creature," he added gravely. "We had a lot of trouble to get her placed. The big shops, you know,—common show-rooms,—you don't like sending a pretty maiden there."

"Lois mentioned an apprentice," said Mrs. Gibbs, who had ceased her knitting, a sign of interest. "I did not know she was handsome, or that her mother drank. Not that it matters at all."

"It would," said the Rector. "It would, don't you see, to Claude. Violet and a girl like that — it couldn't do." His eyes appealed to each in turn.

"I never knew anyone so conventional as you, Papa," said Maud impatiently. "As I am constantly telling you, you have a completely wrong idea of Violet; and I shouldn't wonder if you are just as hard on Uncle Claude. He must be a broad-minded person, really."

"Oh, well," said the Rector, abandoning argument, "talk to him on Sunday. He'll bring the girls down by one-thirty, he says; but we are not to wait lunch more than ten minutes, because he might be delayed twelve at the other end."

"How elaborate," said his daughter, "and how like Uncle Claude. I hope he won't be so busy counting minutes, he'll forget Violet."

"He meant Violet would delay him," said Mr. Gibbs. "Violet's six veils, he said. That's for motoring, eh?"

"What a shame of him!" said Maud warmly. "Margery is more likely to keep him waiting. Violet is as precise as he is, every bit."

"He's not the least precise by nature," said the Rector, musing. "Nor was she. Lazy and luxurious young dogs, the pair of them. He has learnt up all his clockwork along with the professional patter — that is why he is so keen to show it off. Claude's really quite easy to see through, you know. She copies him."

"Which she are you speaking of now?" said Mrs. Gibbs. Her tone was dry, but her aspect was benevolent, and she was knitting calmly again. After all, she had known Margaret too, and no one could be vexed with Arthur's ineptitudes.

"Violet, my dear. She copies her Pa in everything. Artificial little minx, hey, Maudie?"

Maud cast him a double-edged look which said she understood it to be teasing, and disdained to reply; and the Rector, leaving Violet, began on a subject nearer his heart — the new gardener.

IV

CHARLES' MEMORIES

CHARLES, meanwhile, having Violet's note in his pocket, with its promise of her third entrance on his life, timed for Sunday next at half-past one precisely, was too full of the resulting mixed emotions to remain indoors, still less to fix his mind on so ungainly a thing as German. German, according to his mother, was his duty, since Charles understood from her that he was to teach it in the time to come. It is impossible to cast the mind forward upon a prospect such as this, especially on a fine evening, in an admirable Kentish garden full to the brim of early summer fragrances, with a new gardener somewhere in the middle distance requiring careful observation at intervals. Charles preferred to cast it backward, and, while he fumbled with the letter-sheets, for he had abstracted Margery's reports as well, to con over in mind the valuable links which knit the chain, now nearly perfect, of his connection with Miss Ashwin.

The first meeting had occurred at a picnic, a commonplace vacation affair at Cambridge, long-drawn-

out. Violet had not materialized for Charles till the close of the day, though she had been present, she assured him later, all the time. His mother, who considered herself in charge of the young party, had been perfectly intolerable, fagging Charles unmercifully as was her wont, leaving him really no instant of leisure to enjoy himself in his own way. Mrs. Shovell had had, moreover, mirthless jests at his expense with the other chaperon: taunting him — as he considered — with his recent failure in an examination, perfectly natural if properly understood. Charles was so used to her misjudging him that, if she had not twitted him in the presence of girls, he could have borne it. As things were, he ignored her at first, then sulked, and finally withdrew to the margin of the stream, and fell into a melancholy abstraction, nicely suited to the twilight hour.

Now, for the first time, his eye fell on Miss Ashwin, who seemed absent too. She was a mere child, in Charles' condescending eyes, with waves of dark hair tied back in a large bow. She was considered evidently as too young for anyone to notice much, but Charles, having leisure to observe, found her face worth attention. He listened, and every time she spoke she said pretty unexpected things. Now this, at a river picnic, is exceptional. Miss Ashwin packed all the picnic hampers so well and featly that the matrons retired in her favour, and began to

discuss their respective districts, seated on the bank. Charles, recovering rapidly from his sulks, and reclining among the ruins of the feast, was shown how to wind the handles of the cups in hay.

He did it clumsily himself, but he was quite content to watch her little fingers at the game. He discovered at leisure she was pretty, and in a fashion only the elect would admire. He, Charles, was the elect. On the return journey, he let the large punts start, and with the help of Robert Brading, a useful friend, he detached Miss Ashwin, and enticed her into a fleet canoe. After the necessary dodgings and diplomacy, the party moved away, the moon came up, and there began, for Charles, an entrancing evening.

They exchanged notes on nature and art, punctuated by long significant silences. Charles could not make out if she was disdainfully aloof, or tired, or simply demure. She spoke little, really, though she inspired him to speak much; but her use of words, and singular aptitude in placing them, impressed him even then at intervals; and whole sentences remained strung, as he discovered later, in memory. It was this completeness in her, from the first, that abashed his manly superiority.

They came to confidence by degrees, and persuaded themselves rapidly — Charles did, that is, — of a close resemblance in their situations. They were

both oppressed and overlooked by their surroundings. They were both jarred and outraged by details in daily life to which none but the elect gave heed.

"Perhaps we expect too much," admitted Charles. "That is the worst of standards." Miss Ashwin shrugged a little, and dabbled a hand in the stream.

"Aren't you the least trifle *dégoutée*?" queried Charles, with a bright thought: and she accepted it with a smile. Now, there was not a single other girl on that picnic,—and Charles had tried most of them,—who would have passed the word, or failed to interpret it as "disgusted" if they had! It was a triumph of sympathetic insight.

Later, when the moon rose higher, the pair of *dégoutés* got further still. Violet was little over seventeen then, and Charles not yet escaped from one-and-twenty, so that excesses under the summer moon may be excused. At least they never thought of flirting, their range was far above that. They spoke openly, Charles especially, each assuring the other that they had never spoken openly before; which in Violet's case was true, and in Charles' somewhat exaggerated. He had much to say of his life, its discoveries and disappointments; and she, reticent about hers, listened sweetly. Later he realised that, being a girl of wealth and leisure, she could hardly have known such things.

"It is difficult to believe," said Violet vaguely,

dripping water through her fine fingers, "that some people have souls at all."

"My mother has not," said Charles. "She is one. A good soul, don't you think?"

The girl laughed a little, but said, "She *is* good," — thinking of the vigorous debate upon districts, probably.

"What about yours?" said Charles, wondering (since they had never been introduced) if he could venture on Violet's name. "Is she a good soul too?"

Miss Ashwin drooped her lashes. "Mother is not good," she murmured. "Not *even* good." And breathless silence descended.

"It is strange, isn't it," said Charles, growing rapidly happier, "that we should both be placed like this." They agreed it was strange. Thus forced to criticise their mothers, even to condemn, they were quite cut off from the world, and the flirting portion of it in the now distant punts. Obviously, everybody else in the world either owned an ordinary mother, or else had lost her decently. They were unique; and fate, or rather Charles' diplomacy, had thrown them together to discover it. Their friendship,—it was friendship,—had a foundation out of the world, behind time. A nebulous bond united them, a bond which, being nebulous, neither had the temerity, nor the ill-taste, to define. They were ridiculous young people.

"Of course, if I see much of you," said Charles, hunting his vision more ardently as the necessary parting approached, "Mother,—being Mother,—will think we want to be engaged."

Violet looked at him with large grey eyes. "Is she like *that*?" she said.

"She thinks I am like that," Charles explained. "She has always mistaken my character. *You*, nobody could mistake, of course." He looked at her face, pallid in the moonlight, reverentially.

"I should very much like a friend," Miss Ashwin said in her gracious, rather mechanical tone. "But you had far better forget about me, Mr. Shovell. I really don't signify."

"You are the only person I ever met who signified supremely," he returned. "I think you are the best naturally,—and I can only try to be."

He thought of saying "strive," and then abandoned it as a bookish word. It was only this girl who could talk bookishly without seeming the least ridiculous. His last speech was a confession that he felt her sincerity, where other girls would have been aping stagily. For himself, he could only endeavour not to clash with the clear queer impression she made.

She gave him her little fingers at parting,—river-cool,—and said: "I am afraid we shall not meet again." The still tragedy of her tone, and the in-

tensity of her grey eyes through the dusk, thrilled Charles.

“Don’t you appear by day?” he asked.

“Oh!” said Violet, with a breath of disdain. “It is only — Mother and I go on to-morrow.”

“But so do we!” cried Charles. However, there coincidence failed. They were not going to the same place, though both resided in London. Violet was visiting, flitting from friend to friend. Charles was taking his mother to the sea. So they had a parting, perfect in every detail, and delightful in recollection: and then, owing to the intricacies of the English railway system, met the next day at Bletchley Junction.

As Charles had indicated to Miss Lennox, Violet’s atmosphere had triumphed over Bletchley. She had been exquisitely remote on the bridge, bewilderingly sad and lonely, and Mrs. Shovell, when they proceeded, had called her a queer little thing. But Charles, brilliantly inspired to be practical, had taken a short excursion round the piles of Mrs. Ashwin’s luggage; and when he returned, had the Harley Street number safe in the innermost sanctuary of his pocketbook.

This precaution, admirably managed as it was, proved fruitless, for Violet was the first to write. Her

behaviour in doing so was unassailable; for firstly, she left Charles an interval of some seven months in which to speculate upon her, tear up half-written sheets, and track her name about London: the last a cat-and-mouse game that pleased him peculiarly, owing to the comparative notoriety of her name, and the extreme elusiveness of her person. Even when she wrote, she was urged above all by tact and propriety, for the Shovell-Gibbs engagement had lately been announced, and she wrote to Charles as a prospective cousin.

The letter was short as it was admirable, in an extremely pretty handwriting. It was accompanied by one to the bride, written "for Mother," as it appeared, recalling their former meeting in an accustomed manner of society, regretting that Violet herself could not be present at the wedding, as she was going to Cannes,—but dear Uncle Arthur was to be informed that she had told Father to try.

Father had tried, and succeeded, turning up for twenty minutes at Mrs. Gibbs' reception: but Charles, ignorant of his identity till too late, had made the mistake of overlooking him. Violet's notes, however, mere forms as they were, offered him food for much wondering thought. Only a very original person, he decided with acumen, could afford to be so correct. Spurred by a new sense of intimacy, and simultaneously by the assurance Miss Ashwin was

far, Charles sent six sheets, scrawled over impulsively, to the address her father had mentioned at Cannes. He said in the course of them far more than he had intended to say, and spoke about himself exclusively.

After another demure interval, came another admirable note, a square sheet as before, written over in the pretty formed hand, and stamped with an initial in the corner. Charles sniffed the paper attentively, but it had no smell. It was different, not only in this but other respects, from the kind of letter he thought girls wrote, on the evidence of friends at Cambridge. The document, oddly enough, offered little news of the writer, and was largely devoted to the praises of Margery, whom Charles, in his devotion to the highest, had seen fit on first acquaintance to decry. But this was evidently not the way to flatter Violet.

"You had better make a friend of Margery Gibbs," wrote Violet. "You must be firm,—it is only to conquer her shyness. She will be of far more use to you than I. Personally, I am changing with this life, and shall not long respect myself,—how then be respected? You had better forget me, as I said." Ending on this characteristic note of desperation, it left Charles resolved not to forget her, at least. She was, under the circumstances, far too ready to suspect him of infidelity. She evidently

saw him slipping already from their airy bargain — and slipping in Margery's direction. The highest art of long-practised coquetry could not so have stirred Charles' order of boyhood, which needed before all to be pathetic, not prosperous.

He wrote back in a hurry, gathering the discarded clouds of tragedy about him again, proving to his own satisfaction how lonely he was amid the deceptive joys of Glasswell, how useless and downtrodden by the world, and claiming her sympathy anew on the common ground of their first meeting.

After the accustomed pause, she replied again, and plainly he had gained a step, for though still studied in form, the matter of the missive approached to confidence. Yet again, for all its confiding, it cast poor Charles to a great distance: for it consisted of a kind of intermittent diary, studded with the names of the fashionable party Mrs. Claude Ashwin honoured by her adherence: figures of some social note, described with the kind of childish dryness,— the *potpourri* of spring flowers,— that was Violet's specialty. Yet there were indications, not only in the vivid descriptive passages, of her energy of mind. She was studying French with Madame so-and-so, dressmaking with her mother's maid, Monsieur this had explained his Oriental collections to her, or Lieutenant that the mechanism of the cruiser in the bay. Charles began to be jealous of her varied interests,

— cranks, as his mother called them; and told himself bitterly that he had merely had a share of that facile feminine sympathy, pliant to all comers, but of no lasting worth to any. Having thus grumbled in mind through the greater part of the missive, he had to grant at the close that she was again too clever for him; for, desperate anew, she renounced it all, and flung the webs away.

“I cannot pass another winter like this. I have accomplished it for Father, but it is too exhausting. I might say, I am giving my youth away by handfuls, and to Mother, who has no need for it. Mother is greater than I, for she has no doubts: and I doubt myself continually. She will tell Father she is satisfied, I hope, and that will acquit me.”

Soon after that, Violet was “acquitted” apparently. That is, her health or courage failed, and Mrs. Ashwin sent her home, wrecked with the effort of being all things to all men, according to her exquisite standard, in a series of smart hotels. Mrs. Gibbs, who never lost a chance of kindly service, instantly asked her down to Glasswell, to pass the time till her mother’s return, and for the benefit of the country air. Charles spent twenty-four hours in restless anxiety, for he found himself unaccountably dreading the girl’s actual apparition; but it was labour of mind quite wasted, for, true to her tradition, his elusive maiden did not come. Her father came in her

place, flying down in his motor for an hour of the afternoon, to make her explanations to her would-be-hostess. Charles attended curiously to the colloquy, concealed behind the conservatory door, which opened to the drawing-room. Dr. Ashwin, in a tone oddly like Violet's, produced a series of what Mrs. Gibbs called ornamental excuses, beautifully worded, but offering no evidence on the surface of their sincerity. He proceeded to propose, under orders from Violet, apparently, to carry Margery back in his car to town. Margery, overcome by timidity, and the suddenness of the offer, ventured a few excuses on her side; but Dr. Ashwin, though he talked to fill up time to Mr. Gibbs, seemed to be simply waiting for her to fall in with the will of his invisible princess.

Charles, amused since he was not concerned, attended to Margery's struggle and subsequent collapse. At its last stage, her uncle was heard to observe sadly that it was friendly of her, and Margery retired abruptly to dress.

"It is only till my wife comes home," said Dr. Ashwin to Mrs. Gibbs, still attentive and explanatory. "That will not be long now, I understand. We cannot think it good for Violet to be so much alone."

"Has she no friends?" said Mrs. Gibbs, marveling at his manner.

“ Few girl friends, as it happens. And she is not yet strictly in the world, though Eveleen let her see something of society abroad. Eveleen hopes to bring her out next spring, and to present her. Meanwhile, she is on our hands,— and I have little time. I will take care of Miss Margery,” he added quickly, as though foreseeing a last scruple.

“ Extraordinary creature,” Mrs. Gibbs exclaimed, when Margery, wrapped in the doctor’s costly furs, had vanished into the night. “ Why cannot he be natural? Of course, the fact is, the woman won’t let the girl grow up. She is putting off the evil day.”

“ I should not wonder,” said the Rector, with that odd touch of complacency he always showed on the subject of Eveleen. “ Claude’s always very careful of the decorums, though,” he added. “ She has been bothering him, evidently, the scamp: that is what makes him so feverish.”

This last was not intended, naturally, for his stepson’s ears, and indeed it hardly reached them, for Charles was wrapt in thought. Something in the dialogue had recalled to him Violet’s last letter, in which she was giving her youth away by handfuls; and, extreme as the phrase undoubtedly was, for the first time the possibly genuine pathos of the girl’s situation flashed through by its means to his more reasonable mind.

V

AMONG THE PEAS

THE impression did not last long.

Margery's first letter to her sister, kindly shown to Charles by Maud, disposed of pathos, and once more shook his whole conception. It consisted of an enthusiastic description of Violet's wardrobe, which, in accordance with the first duty of a hostess, had been laid before her cousin's eyes.

This letter, if interesting, was elaborate; and Charles, on reaching this point in his recollections, was obliged to have recourse to documentary evidence. He therefore looked about him, as he patrolled the garden-paths, for a haven where he could study the documents, so carefully preserved, in peace. A haven was handy; he had reached on his wanderings the forest of garden-peas, which were the Rector's pride and joy, and of which the earlier sorts, at least, were already of a sufficient size to conceal him. Amid the orderly ranks of these, convenient to his need, he discovered a wooden stool, probably deserted by the gardener, for there was a pail half full of pods beside it. Charles sat down willingly upon the stool,

and in his cool green seclusion, drew the crumpled letters from his pocket.

On her return from the South and arrival in London, it seemed, Violet had been prescribed for very promptly by medical authority below stairs: the prescription being to drive with Father in the park, and go with him to private views and the first nights of plays. Violet had been obliged to explain very firmly to Father that, after the ravages of the Riviera season, she had no clothes. She wished dear Margery to support her, and laid the evidence, in trails of disordered silk and muslin, at her feet. Then, perched on the bed and clasping her knees, she looked at Margery with piteous eyes across the wreck.

"Father liked her to be nice," was her response to all Margery's arguments. She would give the whole of *that* for one nice fresh muslin, like that Margery had worn for dinner the first evening. Father had been simply charmed with that.

"I don't believe he even glanced my way," wrote reasonable Margery. "It is only Violet's polite imagination. But I mentioned Miss Lennox had made the dress, for I thought one might as well do her a good turn. As a matter of fact, it was not Miss Lennox, who was ill at the time, but Miss Lennox's Miss Eccles, the one whose mother drinks. Papa will remember her. I never quite liked that girl, she's too managing; but she certainly cuts well. However, I

did not mention her to Violet, only the things I thought were useful, tell Papa."

The results of Margery's kind thought for Miss Lennox evidently surprised herself. Violet seized the idea of helping her, and helping in a sense which Margery would never have ventured to suggest, and used the utmost address and promptitude to push through the plans she made.

"She seems serious, so far as I can see," wrote Margery, rather disturbed in mind about the matter. "It is always a little hard to know, with her way of putting things. Her words are more wonderful than ever, Maud, this time. She cannot, she says, face another winter like the last. She will not absolutely refuse to be presented, for she is terribly loyal, but she says she would stand before her Sovereign's eye with greater confidence if she stood in the work of her hands. As if Aunt Evie would ever let her! She is the maddest thing,—but just as nice as ever. I am really having the most wonderful time, and being spoiled disgustingly. Violet makes me tell her all sorts of things I ought not, about Papa, and you, and everyone. I have no intention of gossiping, but when she looks at me with those great eyes, I do. And what I leave out with an effort, you know, she fills up in her own words, while I am stammering. I had to tell her all about the business in the end; and all about Miss Lennox's trials with that hateful woman,

and so on. And Violet said it was intensely interesting,—though nobody could possibly call Miss Moffat that,—and declared she was going to speak to Father after dinner,—and she did.”

The parental interview was the next thing, dramatically given.

“Uncle Claude was tired, having had duchesses all day. He terrifies me, especially when he is polite, but Violet takes him very calmly. She began as soon as the man had taken out the coffee. ‘Father dear, are you very tired?’ ‘Not the least,’ said Uncle Claude, who was half asleep. ‘Well, have you any objection to my being a dressmaker?’ ‘Oh, not at all,—it would reduce my bills,’ said Uncle Claude. (Violet and he always sound as if they were rehearsing for theatricals, when they talk. Their voices are just alike, and rather sad. It is killing to listen to them.) ‘Eventually I trust it would,’ says Violet, ‘but I should want a fairish sum of money to start with.’ ‘Do needles cost so much?’ says Uncle Claude. ‘No,’ says Violet, ‘it is only I myself happen to be worth rather less than nothing.’

“Well, that startled him awake. ‘What next, Pussy?’ he said. I ought to mention she was in white silk and moonstones, looking a little more like Juliet than usual. ‘I mean, I should have to be apprenticed,’ says Violet. ‘And that means, somebody must be paid to have patience with me. Regard it

calmly, Father, if you can: you needn't stop smoking.' But he did, and fidgeted into the bargain, looking very miserable. At last he did just what I was expecting, he said — 'Is this Miss Margery's idea?' and turned to me. 'Well,' says Violet, 'Margery considers, as I do, that it's about the only thing I am fit for. You know I am a bungler, don't you, Father?' (She had been playing to us divinely, just before.) 'But there are dozens of girls in London who are bunglers, and make their way all the same; especially if their Fathers make a silver path for them.'

"He looked a little happier at that; and presently he had an idea, and said, suppose she consulted Mother about it. 'I will, when I next meet her,' says Violet, as calmly as possible. 'Tuesday or Wednesday, that will be, I suppose. Apropos, if you find a lady called Lennox at Glasswell on Sunday ——' 'I am not going to Glasswell on Sunday,' says Uncle Claude. 'Oh yes: you are taking poor Margery down. Wait a minute.' She took the engagement-book he had in his hand, turned the leaves, and actually wrote in it while he waited, with a little pencil. 'There, that is readable,' she said. 'Now, to resume, if you should meet this Miss Lennox, don't speak to her in your clicking tone, or in the sleep-walking one that Margery minds still more; but just ask her quietly about her terms. You are

bound to approve of her, because Uncle Arthur does. Good night, Father darling, remember that I count on you.'

"Well, he let her kiss him, though he looked a little dazed; and then he remembered me, and got up on springs,—you know the way. He *does* look ridiculously young, Maud! He was probably wrathful with me really, but he only seemed polite and anxious. 'Kiss Margery,' said the little wretch, making me absolutely jump. 'Then hers shall kiss me on Sunday, in exchange.' 'Then you are coming down with us, Pussy?' he said, turning right around when he had obeyed her. 'Oh,' says Violet from the door, 'one is expected to show oneself on these occasions, I believe.' 'Doesn't one also require a character?' says Uncle Claude. 'I have one,' says Violet, 'from Léontine. Disappointing for you, dear Father, isn't it? I have worked for Léontine several times, when Mother was out. I have elegant French testimonials at call.'

"Well, then he gave her up, and collapsed against the mantelpiece. 'You had better be careful of your get-up, on the occasion,' he said, looking at her in the doorway. 'I will do my best,' says Violet, turning tragic. 'I remember that Cook, the one I engaged at an office for Uncle Arthur's wife, had an especially nice hat. I doubt if I can find such a nice one as Cook's. Mine are all full of confetti.' 'Of

what?' said Uncle Claude. 'From the Carnival, at Mentone,' said Violet. 'No one can wear a hat that is full of disgusting little paper things, can they?' 'If I accompany you to your office,' says Uncle Claude, 'I should wish you to do me credit. What is the price of a respectable hat?' 'Can you bear me in a bonnet?' says Violet, turning more tragic still. 'It is so much more comfortable, and Léontine says my contours support it fairly.'

"He laughed at that,—he is just like Mother when he laughs; and then he stood up suddenly, and bundled us off to bed, because he had an article."

Charles had read this lively letter attentively twice, eating peas the while out of the pail beside him, when the new gardener appeared at the extreme end of the verdant vista to the right. At the unexpected sight of a young gentleman on his stool, he hovered in doubt, and seemed ready to retreat again. But he need have had no fear. Ever ready for fresh discoveries upon the path of life, Mr. Shovell stowed away the letters at once, and prepared to be sociable.

"How are you?" he said, leaning to get a view of the gardener, who was dodging him at the end of the alley. "Is this your pail? I am afraid I have upset a few, by inadvertence."

The new gardener said nothing, which seemed

his principal characteristic; but he took the pail Charles advanced in his direction, and began nipping off the clustering pods, choosing the right ones, among flowers and half-grown fruits, with wonderful celerity and judgment. Charles picked perfunctorily also, chucking a pod from time to time upon the pail, and missing it not infrequently.

"It seems to me," he said soon, "that I should not earn my living at this game. What do you think about it, John?"

"Abel, sir," said the new gardener. His accent was impeccable, Charles observed, and the "sir" seemed, in his mouth, a graceful superfluity.

"Excellent," said Charles cordially. "Infinitely more original than John, and Biblical too. But you will never get them to call you that."

"No, sir?" said the new gardener, busily picking.

"No," said Charles, watching him as busily. "What other names have you now, I wonder?"

The man glanced at him, as though with a shade of suspicion: but said, in the same refined and quiet accent, "Peacock, sir. Vane-Peacock."

"You never mean it!" said Charles, almost staggering off the stool. "Vane,—and Peacock too? Mine is Shovell,—simply Shovell, you know. Hadn't we better change?" The proposal was made so earnestly as to take Mr. Peacock aback; but he found nothing to do but to pick peas, so Charles con-

tinued. "Shovell, you know,—spades. It's even appropriate to the calling. I can't hear my mother calling for Vane-Peacock. Where's Vane-Peacock? I suppose she knew it when she engaged you?"

"She did not engage me," said the gardener, with another look at Charles. He was a tall, imposing figure of a man, but for all his physical stateliness, his bearing had a touch of uncertainty about it. His features, as Charles had noticed from the drawing-room, were admirable, but the lips and chin, the lines which testify to character, were obscured by a short beard.

"Didn't she?" said Charles. "Who did then,—his Reverence? Ah, well, he's a Socialist, of course, so it would strike him less."

During the long silence that ensued, he wondered if Mr. Vane-Peacock was by any chance offended. His own affability was sometimes apt to be misinterpreted; and this, by all outward signs, as well as in name, was a remarkable fellow.

"I wonder," mused Charles, "if this is what they call a gentleman gardener? I ought to have asked the governor before I started talking. It's so very hard to make out nowadays; and one would not want to blunder at first acquaintance."

"You pick peas wonderfully fast," he said politely. "I suppose you studied your profession. Where did you start life, now. London?"

"Staines," said Mr. Vane-Peacock.

"To be sure,—my mistake." Charles laughed agreeably. "Not many market-gardens in the City, are there? It's a pretty stiff training, I suppose." He tugged at the stalk of a pod. "What are the qualities, in your opinion, one most requires? Patience?" He abandoned the stiff pod, and pointed it out to Peacock, who twitched it off and threw it in the pail. "You see," he added gravely, "I am thinking of taking up some sort of profession myself, one of these days: and that might do."

Vane-Peacock set down the pail, turned round upon Charles, and stared. Thus seen full-face, he was certainly a very handsome man; though blank astonishment is not the expression which sets off admirable features best.

"I am afraid, Vane-Peacock," said Charles, reflecting aloud, "that Margery will want to paint you. You have not yet met the younger Miss Gibbs, I believe. She is coming home on Sunday. Have you ever sat for your portrait to a young lady? *That* needs patience, if you like. But Margery swoops upon everybody, regardless of their more regular occupations; and I cannot think she will long let you off. I only warn you," he added, "for your good."

"Thank you, sir," mumbled Mr. Peacock. Charles thought he perceived him blushing, actually, as he moved among the peas.

"That last speech was an exact reproduction of what I said to Bob Brading last Sunday," he reflected, "and Abel blushes in just the same fashion as Bob. Now, Bob will be a baronight as soon as Dr. Ashwin has finished off his father, and Abel studied gardening at Staines. Of course, on some questions the classes might resemble one another. It might be simply the name Margery,—it's such a frightfully feminine-sounding one. Any man of real self-respect would shy at it a little."

"I don't suppose you have any sisters," said Charles, raising his voice as the gardener retreated down the row. "Five? Oh, that's all right. Pretty, are they? — I expect so. You have cousins perhaps as well? Female ones? On the Vane-Peacock side, or the other? I say, I hope you don't mind my gassing like this. It's only my way."

The new gardener did not mind it, apparently. At least, he could easily have moved to the next rank of peas if he had chosen. Charles watched him wistfully, envying his power of dignified silence, but quite incapable of imitating it. The sound of his own voice among the peas was dear to him. Besides, if he went into the house to his German, as duty had for some time past been directing him, Vane-Peacock would be so lonely.

"I hope you like the cook," said Charles, shifting the stool a trifle in his wake. "She is Mother's

choice: at least Mother approved of her. Miss Gibbs' cousin, Miss Ashwin, chose her actually, at a registry office in London."

At the name, the new gardener's shoulders started. He stopped working, braced himself, and stood upright. "Miss *Ashwin*, sir?" he said.

"Violet Ashwin," said Charles airily, much pleased by his attention. "Pretty name, isn't it? I've a letter from her here." He began to consider if, pending the arrival of Margery, he could show the letter to this quiet, sympathetic, distinguished-looking man. But he decided he would not proceed without more definite encouragement. A man so evidently rich in sisters and cousins as Peacock might even be disdainful of his dear possession.

"The hawfinches have been at these peas, sir," said Peacock, after a pause,—much the longest sentence he had yet pronounced. Charles longed to congratulate him on the well-marked opening of the word hawfinch, but fancied it might not be acceptable.

"Hawfinches it is," he said, endeavouring not to overdo the aspirate. "The windmills are supposed to scare them. I saw you admiring them lately, out of the drawing-room window. Did you have windmills at Staines?"

"No, sir," said Peacock.

"I thought as much. The governor made them,

and Margery, I believe, chose the colours. Yet I had my doubts if the sort of thing is done in first-class gardens. To my mind the decoration is overdone. I can imagine a hawfinch saying,— ‘ Quite a pleasant breeze, my dear. Come along and eat peas, and watch Mr. Gibbs’ little windmills turning.’ But that’s the gentleman-amateur all over, isn’t it? ”

Charles thought this a neat trap, and watched Vane-Peacock, or what he could see of him, through the hedge. He thought he really must betray himself if he answered; and quite forgot that he might choose the course of not answering at all. This negative quality in the man was disconcerting, and provocative. Charles decided that he would have to talk to Peacock at every opportunity, or he would really finish by respecting him.

“ His manners are perfect,” pronounced Charles. “ How little it needs, to be classed as well-mannered, really. Peacock has hardly answered any of my remarks, and when he does it is generally by a monosyllable or a repetition. Yet I defy a duke to behave better than Peacock has done this half-hour, and he has worked hard all the time. Of course, physical magnificence is more than half the battle; but a quiet manner increases it. And I never in all my life met a quieter manner than Peacock’s.”

VI

VISITORS AT GLASSWELL

CHARLES saved up Peacock carefully as a subject of conversation, when the motor-party arrived on Sunday, for he felt he might be in want of subjects. He had not yet met Dr. Ashwin face to face, and had neglected him rather flagrantly at the wedding, not being properly posted up as to his importance. Charles hoped to the last that he would be prevented from coming, persuading himself that doctors always are prevented, generally on the doorstep, by a telegram. In this case, Violet and Margery would arrive alone, go about arm-in-arm as girls do, and could be dealt with in the mass, as it were, with a pleasant patter of brotherly chaff. Charles might be said to shine at patter; but society conversation, in the glare of publicity, and under his quasi-uncle's cool dark eye, was quite another pair of shoes.

So indeed Charles found it: for the party turned up complete, and punctual to the hour given, without even the extra ten minutes Dr. Ashwin had allowed for his daughter's veils at starting. Charles heard the arrival from his room above the drive, and

took stock of the family gathering carefully over the banisters, before he strolled casually down into the hall.

Dr. Ashwin had placed himself at his hostess's elbow, and appeared to be behaving quietly, and not glittering in any manner to annoy. He also very evidently suffered from hay-fever, a tiresome and disfiguring ailment, so that Charles thought less of his appearance than he had been led to expect by the girls. Margery, a tall, pretty creature of eighteen, was circled appropriately by the Rector's arm, and leant against his shoulder, laughing shyly as usual at the remarks of others. Margery was rather blowsed and dishevelled by the wind; but Violet, having discarded veils and other impedimenta, and touched her hair to either side with two delicate decided hands, emerged upon the world immaculate as when she shrouded herself at starting.

Charles felt half exultant, half confused by her completeness. They were a large mixed party with whom Miss Ashwin had to deal, but, undismayed by numbers after her recent practice at Mentone, she met everybody correctly, with short emphatic speeches. It had been *too* sad, Mrs. Gibbs was informed, to refuse the invitation to Glasswell, and far better than Violet deserved to have Margery. "Father and I," Maud was privately assured, thought Margery looking *quite* lovely, and so well!

Uncle Arthur was to tell Father *at once* what the rose was by the gate, and *see* that he wrote it down, because he was so careless. She gave Charles precisely the same hand-shake,—rather high,—that she gave to Robert Brading, but she added a little smile in Charles' case, demure and dimly appealing. Mr. Shepherd the curate she bowed to gravely.

Charles thought he saw, and was triumphant in the thought, that his mother disapproved on sight of Violet. Mrs. Gibbs, superficially minded, would naturally not penetrate to her finer qualities. Bob Brading, on the other hand, saw and looked beyond them; for though manifestly respectful to Miss Ashwin, the daughter of a man he admired, and attentive to all she said, his eyes did not dwell upon her. She did not exist for him beside Margery Gibbs.

Robert, an excellently modest youth, thought that he had fathomed the reason of Margery's apparent indifference to his presence at Glasswell. He was labouring in the matter under a misapprehension, the fault of Charles. Robert had plenty of solid brain-power, and had scored successively in all the examinations where Charles had failed; but he was not ingenious, and he was a prey to ingenuity. Charles educated Robert by startling him frequently, and upsetting him at intervals; and he had been upset into an absolute bramble-patch of delusion over the Ashwin affair.

Charles had started confidences, as usual, by mentioning to Bob on a suitable twilight occasion, that only one woman in the world had ever understood him. He chose his hour and his tone of voice so well, that Bob was persuaded the only woman was dead. Then, a little later, with the news of Mrs. Shovell's engagement, a wave of excitement on Charles' horizon became most apparent to his friends, exhibiting itself by the strangest feverish symptoms; and Robert, much hustled by small hints, could only suppose that the only woman had come to life again, and was at present in the offing. Still under these confused impressions, he went down to Glasswell on a Saturday for tennis,—and saw Margery Gibbs. There could be no further doubt of it, of course,—unhappily for Robert. And he was only waiting now, as he told himself firmly, to congratulate Charles.

Great doubt, soul-searching, and suspense were Robert's portion this day, owing to Margery's diffident and non-committal behaviour; and he was very far at present from divining that the only woman, all the time, for the admirable Shovell, was that slim little girl with the waves of dark hair, who sat daintily poised upon a blue sofa, and whose sole fortune in life it was to be called cousin by Margery. Thus are men made, and from this kind of wretched groping are clever men not exempted. Meanwhile,

Robert talked to both girls much more readily than Charles; for Brading was one of those people, hated by their wittier friends, with a store of nothings to say on every occasion, and with no apparent consciousness of the vanity of their conversation.

Charles, as he told himself, could not get a word in edgeways, wished he had not invited Brading, and began to sulk. He longed for somebody to snub Brading, who had served every purpose he could serve by breaking the first stiffness; and whose plain duty it now was to leave the field to others better qualified for the game.

The first person, however, to come to our hero's assistance was Dr. Ashwin, who had been sweeping in the company methodically, while he fought his threatened asthma, and talked to Mrs. Gibbs. When the party re-grouped, he walked across to Robert, and asked him how his father did. This, Charles thought, would have done for most fellows, for Dr. Ashwin was known to be one of the few authorities in England on Sir Rupert Brading's disease. However, Bob had a commonplace all ready for him, as it appeared, and the pair moved aside, speaking low.

Then Margery, warned by her cousin's hand plucking at a stray curl, slipped to a glass to smooth her hair,—and Charles had his tardy opportunity. But alas! the opportunity being unforeseen, and his sulks half settled, he found nothing to say; and after

a pause, Miss Ashwin obviously waiting for him while she watched the point of her shoe, she had to make the opening move.

"I am glad Mr. Brading's poor Father is better," said Violet.

"Had you known Brading before, then?" said Charles. The speech was that of an ordinary young man in a temper, simply. Violet glanced at him surprised.

"Oh, no,—not this one," she said. "But we hear of the old one so much. Father is always having telegrams."

"I suppose he won't last out the winter," said Charles, who knew very little of his friend's family circumstances: though, it need not be mentioned, Robert knew all his.

"If he would only trust Father altogether," said Violet, with a bitter sigh. "But he only sends panicky telegrams. Poor Mr. Brading!"

"I don't think Bob has much to be sorry for," said Charles sarcastically. Then, owing to Violet's silence, he wondered if the sarcasm was misplaced. He could not explain to her that he had, as it were, reserved her sympathy to himself, and that Brading's family tragedies, however startling at first acquaintance, bore no comparison with his. Argue it as you would, old Brading's demise left Bob a baronet. Bob would never have to choose among six revolting

careers in order to make a living, like Charles. Such details are not in taste to mention, but Violet might give a passing thought to them.

Before they got any further, the Reverend Arthur Gibbs approached their corner, bearing slowly down upon them, in all his rectorial Sunday grandeur. Violet beamed a demure welcome as he came.

"Mademoiselle est servie," remarked Mr. Gibbs, not too loud, crooking his arm suggestively, and cocking an eye at Violet. She seized the arm, button-holing him.

"Oh, but surely,—Miss Lennox," she protested, with her charming intensity, as of a fine hostess's feelings outraged.

"I doubt it," said the Rector, "really. The Church has an eye for the quality." He winked towards Violet's father's back. "Next New Year,—you mark my words."

"How *vulgar!*" said Violet, with such incisiveness that the doctor swung about, surprised.

"Sir Claude," said the Rector, on the instant, "you will take my wife. Hurry, man, because we're hungry. Margery, stop coyly curling your hair, and take Brading. Miss Lennox will honour Charles. Maud,—bother, where's the girl gone? Well, she will be found in the dining-room, fussing about. I wish I'd called her Martha. She will sit by you, Shepherd, eventually, if you follow patiently behind

the flock. It's the shepherd's time-honoured position," he added for his partner's benefit.

"Surely in front," said Violet.

"Don't show too much nasty learning," advised the Rector, "or you'll frighten Charles. Shepherd goes behind *me*, naturally."

"Why?" said Violet, with innocence, smiling sweetly over her shoulder at the curate.

Even the curate came in for her sympathy! — it was maddening. Charles had hoped at least to have her ear at luncheon; but instead of that he was snubbed by a light-minded stepfather, and given Miss Lennox, who was wearing something like a baby's robe, and was, in Charles' opinion, far too old for it. He had seen Violet's eye rest for a thoughtful moment on this garment, as she passed; and it had given him his cue, for he was very heedful of her expression.

By adroit management he did get a place next her at table, and Brading, opposite, was happily engrossed by Margery, for he had at last found a subject,— art,— on which she would reply a little. But Charles was baulked anew in confidence, by Violet's undisguised interest in the dialogue between the host and his brother-in-law, further down the table; for the doctor sat at Miss Lennox's other side, and engaged her very soon, in duty bound, on the subject of her industry at Battersea. Mr. Gibbs

prompted for a time, and then, perceiving Claude's smartness, desisted.

"Let him go," he soliloquised over his carving, with the eye of amusement. "Tape and buttons have no mysteries for him, have they? You and I will talk of routs in the Metropolis, meanwhile."

"Thanks, Uncle Arthur," said Violet. "But do you mind my listening? She is *so* interesting."

"Bother!" thought Charles.

"She's a good soul," said the Rector quietly. "More sense than appears. She'll plant you somewhere, I'll warrant, if that's all you're wanting."

"It is not all," said Violet. "I have very definite proposals, which I formulated to Father, coming down."

"Humph!" said the Rector.

"Are you working against me?" enquired Violet. "Is he, Mr. Shovell?"

"Kindly notice those peas," said the Rector. "I grew them."

"Where *is* Battersea exactly?" said Violet, clasping her hands on the table.

"Good Lord," said the Rector. "I christened you there."

"I don't remember it," said Violet. "Have mercy on my ignorance. I really know nothing that side, — except Waterloo."

"Waterloo," said the Rector, abstracted. "Well,

there have been some Waterloos fought there, even in my time."

"Won't you tell me some?" said Violet. He glanced amusement at her, with an intent look, all the same.

"You?" he said. "Goodness, no. You eat your dinner, Miss."

"You see what he thinks of me," said Violet, plaintive but quite uncrushed, to Charles. "The worst of churchmen is, they always think they know what is suitable for people."

"Particularly girls," said Margery opposite.

"Of course, he has you and Maud," said Violet to Margery. "That gives him more right to speak than many men might have. But he probably takes your usefulness for granted, and would have called you lamentable exceptions if you had not been. Now, I am an exception ——"

"But not lamented," said her uncle.

"Encouraged!" cried Violet. "Mother is encouraged too." She ate a pea and had an idea. "Listen, Uncle Arthur. It was Margery's influence ——"

"Oh, Violet!" interposed Margery, shocked.

"Her quiet influence," said Violet. "It was like a ray of light in our house,—and even Father felt it."

"Henrietta," complained Mr. Gibbs, "I am being

hen-pecked. There's a Monstrous Regiment sitting upon me. Why on earth do I have to preside at my own table, with relatives to either side? As well be in the nursery," he grumbled.

"Arthur," said Mrs. Gibbs' weightiest tone. "Do you hear what Lois is saying? That Miss Eccles thinks of leaving her,—again! Why can't the girl be contented?"

The host's attention was diverted. "Who is Miss Eccles?" said Violet *sotto voce* to Charles.

"I don't know," said Charles, drawing in his chair a little, "and I shouldn't ask."

But Violet did. Her elegant little eyebrows went up at Margery across the table, for host and hostess were conversing across her. Margery touched part of the costume she was wearing.

"Forewoman,—she made it," signalled Margery.

"Very good," signalled Violet, with an emphatic nod, and turned pensive for a considerable period. The truth was,—and had better be hastily stated,—that the first real discouragement in Miss Ashwin's contemplated project had come, neither from her father nor her uncle, nor even from Miss Lennox's awkward manner and harassed face,—but from Miss Lennox's Sunday gown below it. Dress was to the point, even Violet's father could not deny; also the mere sight of incompetence in such things vexed Violet. The "silver path" on which her feet

had been set in life had been such that the best, and the best only, fell constantly beneath her view. The second-best, the cheap, the dowdy, worried her vaguely, even while her sense of duty found excuses for it. She had that habit of the rich of believing that such imperfections need not be. She did not believe that Miss Lennox need look like that, with proper attention: and she felt a sympathy, remote but quite perceptible, with the forewoman of whom Miss Lennox disapproved.

Quick of ear and eye, she thought she detected in her father's manner, heed-fully suited to his society as it always was, that Miss Lennox was not the soaring ideal he had contemplated for his daughter, on the strength of Margery's recommendation. Violet could not catch all that passed, for Mrs. Gibbs and her friend were both talking at the doctor simultaneously; and the Rector's own share in the colloquy, being distant, was largely short replies, or glances of intelligence exchanged down the table with his wife.

"Perhaps it's all for the best," he said quietly once; and Violet gathered he was alluding to the projected departure of Miss Eccles. She shut her lips and made a resolution to look into this matter later. Shortly after, by one of the inexplicable coincidences of table dialogue, everybody seemed

to be suddenly at the end of what they had to say, and there was silence in the room.

It was Charles' long-looked-for opportunity. Robert Brading opened his mouth, but Charles was first in the breach.

"Our new gardener," he said, for everybody's benefit, but as though continuing a conversation with Violet, "is a strong, silent man."

"Charles, what nonsense," said Mrs. Gibbs.

"He has the manners of the ancien régime," said Charles.

"England at its best," said the Rector, amused, "and France at its worst. Go on, my boy."

"And his name is Vane-Peacock," finished Charles.

It had all the effect he had contemplated. "Impossible," said Dr. Ashwin's definite soft staccato, just forestalling the laughter of the guests.

"Truth," said Charles, shaking his head, "is stranger than fiction. Vane-Peacock is his name. It has caused my mother sleepless nights, trying to get over it, or round it, since he came. You see —" aside to Violet,—"her present name is Gibbs."

"It really is a ridiculous combination, isn't it?" said Mrs. Gibbs to her neighbour, ignoring Charles.

"It is an impossible one," said Claude Ashwin again.

“Do you suggest, sir,” said the Rector severely, “that my gardener is masquerading?”

“I do,” said Claude. “Give me ten minutes’ private interview, and I promise I could at least extract the Vane.”

“Talks like a dentist, doesn’t he?” said Mr. Gibbs, with a grimace in Violet’s direction. Then he leant back. “It’s not to be thought of is it, Claude?” he jibed. “Double-barreled, — the working-classes, — where are we getting to, hey?”

“Look here, will you introduce me?” said his brother-in-law.

“And me?” cried Violet.

“Vane-Peacock is rather shy,” objected Charles.

“So I should expect,” said Claude. He leant a second to look at Charles across the intervening lady. Owing to chance combinations, the boy was the one member of the company he had not yet thoroughly investigated, and he seized the shifting opportunity to make sure of him. These short inspections were his habit, in connection, no doubt, with the infallible notebook of his memory. But Charles was not used to it, and he coloured up.

“He thinks Peacock a fraud, and you’re in collusion, Charles,” said the Rector kindly. “And I’m harbouring criminals, I shouldn’t wonder. Sharp men are so suspicious. The man’s a capital worker, Claude, — that should appeal to you.”

“With a Praxitelean profile,” added Charles.

“He’s certainly a handsome fellow,” said the Rector, with that manner of detachment that is persuasive. “I say!” he added. “Margery’s drawn.”

“So will he be,” said Charles; and everybody laughed, as the artist, whose shy aspect had changed to eagerness for the moment, shrank back again, blushing consciously.

Dr. Ashwin, having allowed a sufficient interlude for the young people’s chaffing, returned to his neighbour Miss Lennox.

“I never knew but one man,” he said to her indifferently, “who really had the mask of a Greek warrior; and he was one of the weakest characters I ever met.”

“Indeed?” said Miss Lennox. “Where did you meet him, Dr. Ashwin?”

“He once fell under my care in hospital for a time, for injuries to the neck.”

“To the neck?” said the host, his brow knitting. Robert Brading’s head turned sharply also.

“Oh, Father!” gasped Violet, paling. One little hand rose instinctively to her throat.

“An accident, I suppose?” said Mrs. Gibbs, quietly sensible.

“Accidental, yes,” said the doctor. “It was entirely his own stupidity, as I informed him.” The

careless reply reached Violet, whose clenched hand dropped on the table again. Her uncle, who had been watching her in some anxiety, kept his mouth shut, since Claude had given the lead.

“Did he die?” blurted Robert, leaning forward. He had failed to notice Violet’s change of colour; and Margery, who could have stopped him, was puzzled. Some hitch in the natural sequence had been apparent to the more intelligent members of the company; and Margery, though not very sensitive, was highly intelligent.

“No,” said Claude to Robert. “Not that time.”

Since the hostess made a movement, he rose with decision, and drew back Miss Lennox’s chair. As his daughter passed him, he said something to her low, which she only answered with an emphatic little movement of her head and shoulders, perfectly expressive of her sentiments.

As for Mr. Shovell, he strolled, carelessly as it were, after the ladies; he stole the march on Robert deliberately, though, if he had been consulted in the matter, he would have preferred not to be obliged to run the gauntlet of Violet’s father’s penetrating eyes in doing so. He told himself, just at the moment of passing, that he really failed to perceive what the world in general, and Miss Ashwin in particular, saw in this man, who had not said a single thing worth listening to during the meal.

VII

THE TALE OF ACHILLES

"SENILE decay," announced the Rector, settling squarely into his place when the feminine world was gone. "I never knew you tell a pointless story, Claude."

"I apologise," said his brother-in-law. "I shouldn't have tried it. She is getting worse, I think." The bar was in his brow, the bar that showed at once on any reference to Violet. "I think," he added cautiously, as he lit a cigarette, "that Miss Lennox did not miss it."

"The point? Oh, no, not she. But here's Robert gaping simply; and you have a character to maintain. What was the true history of your Achilles?"

"It's simple," said Claude, glancing in Robert's direction. "The man was such a natural bungler that he couldn't even cut an artery when he wished to; and I made out he had wished to, quite genuinely, for some minutes at least."

"Did you lecture him on the art?" said the Rector rather grimly.

"I refrained," said Claude, his eyes on his cigar-

ette; "there's something so pitiful in real stupidity."

"I see, it was that that moved you." Mr. Gibbs seemed content. His manner to this "indecently successful" relative, several years his younger, was very pleasant and elder-brotherly. "Go on, man," he prompted. "Tell us what you did."

"I got the facts, so far as it was possible."

"Why wasn't it possible?"

"Stupidity, I tell you. On my honour, he barely knew his native tongue. Yet he was English, born and bred. Did it ever occur to you, Arthur, that a boy can come through all our board-schools, and not know at the end of it how to speak?"

"The public schools," contended Mr. Gibbs, "are just as bad. Do you mean he pronounced imperfectly?"

"No. He had an ear,—just as he had a good production, and beautiful teeth,—by no means always the case in his class."

"What was his class?"

"There you have me,—it was impossible to say. I had him to the house later, and examined him, to see if I could find out."

"Sheer curiosity," said the Rector, with satisfaction. "All right, go on."

"I should think he had four or five dozen words in his vocabulary; and no real morality at all."

"What do you mean by real morality?" said Mr.

Shepherd the curate, waking: and his superior smiled beneath his hand.

“He was governed by the need to be respectable,” said Claude, waking too. “He had chosen his words with that view solely, and his clothes, with a kind of admirable caution,—a self-protective instinct, common to animals of the lower orders,—and fools of the upper.”

“Oh, I say,” protested Mr. Brading.

“The society touch,” said Mr. Gibbs. “It’s himself he’s talking at, Bob, not you.”

“But look here,” urged Robert, “why had he tried to cut his throat? That’s not respectable, particularly.”

“No,” said Claude, “but it was, to his fool’s mind. That is, it was more respectable than prison which was the only remaining alternative.”

“All right,” said the Rector. “We don’t flinch, as you see. You can’t make us jump by a little thing like that. You’ll tell us now prison is the natural destination of gentlemen.”

“Gentlemanly asses ——”

“A pity Charlie left us,” said the Rector.

“And gentlemen out of place. Well, so it is,” said Claude. “They’re safer there, at all events.”

“Did you tell Achilles he’d have been better in prison? You were never such a brute, Claude. What had the poor fellow taken?”

“The poor fellow had taken a motor-car, the property of a man at Staines.”

“I say! — that’s good” — from Robert.

“It might have been,” Claude agreed. “But he shilly-shallied over the business, as usual.”

“You mean he hesitated,” interposed the curate, who, slightly flushed, was evidently up in arms for the defence. The Rector, much entertained, detected the jealousy of the professions, and sat by amid his smoke, prepared to spur it if necessary.

“Yes,” said the doctor. “He had a devil of hesitation. He didn’t even confess it straight. He told me he had taken it for the afternoon,— for a run to Oxford. Oxford struck me as good,— hey, Arthur? Instinct again.”

“You beastly cynic!” Mr. Gibbs was spurred to take part. “Why shouldn’t he have borrowed, and intended to return it?”

“I don’t doubt he intended it, in his fashion; but he couldn’t have done it for his life. He would have looked too nice inside.”

“This is simply jealousy,” said the Rector. “What do you say, Shepherd? I believe he defeated you in argument, Claude.”

“He defeated me utterly. I’ve never been so tired,” said Claude, “after any interview in my life. I daresay he despises me to this day for my restless curiosity. But I got all the history I wanted.”

“ You supplied it,” said the Rector.

“ He supplied it,— on my honour, Arthur! In the style of a spelling-book,— but comprehensible to the merest philosopher.”

“ You anticipate me,” said Mr. Gibbs. “ Greatsman, I was about to say, but yours sounds prettier.”

“ Was he nabbed, then? ” demanded Robert, whose object was the story.

“ He was traced to Oxford,— and left in a hurry, with the car.”

“ For Staines,” cried the Rector. “ What did I say? ”

“ Doubtless: but he overshot Staines, and arrived in London: which was the first sensible thing he had done.”

“ Sensible? ” said the curate.

“ Certainly,— if he had decided to be a criminal. But he hadn’t decided anything. He took fright,— his conscience awoke, as you would say,— left the car in a public place, where it was reclaimed by the police, and retired to cut his throat quietly in the neighbourhood of a hospital.”

“ That shows prudence, at least,” said Mr. Gibbs.

“ The last infirmity of an ignoble mind,” snapped Claude.

Mr. Shepherd, recognising the quotation, laughed. Then, facing the staggering fact of the story, he said, “ Poor fellow! ” very gravely.

"Shepherd finds it rather admirable," said the Rector. "I'm not sure I don't too. What about you, Bob?"

"He must have been rather a footler," said Mr. Brading, after thought.

"Good,—it's the Church against the laity, then. We're still waiting for the sequel, Claude. Having saved the scamp's life, and taken his confession, what did you do next? I suppose red-handed justice was waiting for him round the corner."

"No, she was not. That's where you're wrong. Justice won't look at fellows like that. Undeserved clemency was waiting for him; sympathy and consideration dogged his steps. The owner of the car, who had known him, thought he was a very superior man, of very refined instincts, and he had done extremely wrong to let such a temptation as an empty car stand in his way."

"Was he a Reverend too?" enquired Robert. "I say, I'm sorry, Mr. Gibbs."

"No. He was a rose-grower, and a sentimentalist. Perhaps all rose-growers are. He had the infernal folly," said Claude, warming suddenly, "to write to me — to *me*,— suggesting kleptomania."

"It's said to be an upper-class malady," said Mr. Gibbs, a twinkling eye upon him. Throughout, he had been attending more to the man than the story he told. That was the Rector's way.

"I wish the term had never got beyond the dictionary," said Claude, with a bitterness vividly recalling his daughter's tone. "I had already sent him my opinion of the case, as clear as I could state it,—just as I have stated it to you."

"Cheek," agreed Robert soothingly. "What did you answer the rose-grower, sir?"

"I said, if he showed any such symptoms of nervous debility, quiet confinement was what he needed."

"You did not," said the Rector. "That's only the dinner-table version. You probably hushed the scandal up, and started a collection."

"The parson at Staines had already done that," his brother-in-law retorted. "And the rose-grower followed,—and all the ladies of the parish rushed to join."

"Then he was a regular attendant, I expect," said Mr. Shepherd, quietly firm.

"Attendant? — ah,—perfectly regular, yes. It was no credit to him," the doctor added hastily. "He simply hadn't the originality to be otherwise."

There ensued an interval, during which the Rector smoked, and pondered in silence, with an occasional shake of his lion-head. He was subtracting Claude from his story, as it were, and found the mathematical result, though curious in its way, suggestive of other and melancholy things which had occurred

during his long experience. He had not the remotest inkling at this stage of any intention on Claude's part beyond that of entertaining them, in which he generally succeeded. Peacock, with the ghosts of the former conversation, had long since passed from his mind. The Rector was an excessively easy person to mislead, as a pair of young Ashwins, twenty-five years previously, had discovered. One had but to tempt him into the by-way of one of his private interests,—and he was a man of many harmless cranks and investigations,—for him to ignore all other logical conclusions or sly suggestions that might naturally be derived from the dialogue. Bob Brading alone, by the light in the narrator's eye, suspected that some seed of unsown diversion still remained; and Bob was far too respectful to his seniors to ask for it. He followed his own ingenuous reflections on the case instead.

“Was there a girl in the business?” he asked abruptly.

The host rose, and Dr. Ashwin too, before he answered. Then he said in his most expressionless tone —

“Probably: but I did not press him.”

Nor did he even glance at Robert in replying; for, as eventually appeared in intimate conversation with Mr. Gibbs, he had taken him in, and Margery, and their whole situation, with its simple problem

of honourable scruple on the one side, and intense natural shyness on the other, in the ten minutes, while he had both beneath his eyes before the meal.

Charles denied himself the men's time-honoured privilege in vain: the ladies obviously did not want him. He sulked for at least an hour down by the peas, smoking and peering through the laurel hedge at intervals, before he spied, and seized upon his opportunity.

All that time, Miss Ashwin had been planted on a cushion at Miss Lennox's feet, beneath the mulberry on the lawn, where, clasping her knees, she had been listening sweetly to Mrs. Gibbs' opinions, in the original version, and second-hand through the mouth of her friend. Miss Lennox spoke the more freely, but Violet, an expert in original documents, recognised the authority very well, though she directed her answers tactfully to Miss Lennox every time. She looked very pretty and very tranquil to Charles' attentive eye, whenever he caught a glimpse of her through the hedge; and he had every reason to hope that the grotesque idea of her joining Miss Lennox in trade had been utterly routed, long before the close of the conversation.

"I hope that old female has not been boring you," he said, when he finally dislodged her, and steered their course towards the rose-garden; for

showing Miss Ashwin the roses had been his able excuse.

"Well, you see," said Violet, holding her hair with both hands in the breeze, "that's what I came down for."

"To be bored?"

"Mr. Shovell! To find out all I possibly could about Miss Lennox, and her ideas: and to let her make what she could of me."

"Well, I should say she'll use you to the worst possible advantage," said Charles. "Look at her get-up."

"I did, of course; but that's not a real sticking-place. Mother is the real sticking-place, as your mother very soon found out. Of course, Father has given me his word to do what he can; but I really think," said Violet, holding her hair and looking worried, "Mother and Miss Lennox had better not meet. They are such different types, you know."

"Won't they have to meet?" said Charles.

"Well, there's a fighting chance, as Father would say, that Mother may wash her hands of me."

"Would he say that?" said Charles, rather staggered.

"No, no. Fighting chance is Father, Mr. Shovell; all the rest of it is me. And I," added Violet gently, "would not have said it to anyone but you."

Charles glowed. Here was the bond he had missed

all day! He came closer to her promptly, and felt all her original glamour revive.

"It is easy to get vulgar in one's thoughts about some people," pursued Violet. "But when they are relations, you have to watch your words. I get so tired of watching eternally,—my soul is craving for Battersea. Oh, I hope she will let me go!"

The end was childish, but as characteristic as the elaboration of the rest; and what was more important, she seized Charles' arm. Charles enjoyed this, walking on air, until they reached the rose-garden; when she dropped her hand with the same ease that she had shown in placing it there, and began to caress the roses.

"Shut your eyes tight," Charles advised, as she laid her cheek against the cool curved petals,—
"breathe hard, and think of Battersea."

"I am thinking," she assured him. "Will you recommend me, Mr. Shovell, and visit me sometimes? I am afraid I shall be rather a fixture."

"It won't be every day, I suppose," said Charles, absently entranced by her proceedings. He thought he had never seen anything so delicate as her manner of flirtation with the flowers. It was hard to believe that some of it was not meant for him; and yet, granted a Londoner in the country, one could not be sure. One never could be sure, with Miss Ashwin.

"Except Sunday," Violet informed him, "and

Saturday afternoon. Miss Lennox's hours are very kind ones, nine to seven with lunch and tea intervals. I made her give me the girls' time-table exactly, because vagueness in a matter like that is nonsense, after all."

"But ——" Charles was staggered anew. "You mean to say your mother's not bound to mind?"

"Would yours?" said Violet sweetly.

"Of course not," countered Charles. "I'm important to mine, worse luck." He added illogically, — "And you are of course a great deal more important than you will admit."

"No," said Violet. "Not this year, I mean. After next March, Mother will have to notice me a little. This spring, she simply put me through my paces at Mentone, and I have reason to hope she was satisfied." She sat down on the sun-warmed bank of the tennis-court, and considered at leisure, clasping her knees. "Mother," she said, "is coming home by Paris, and we all know what that means. For the first few days she will dazzle us terribly, and we shall have all we can do to withstand her. But Father is a business man,—and that means a man of honour, doesn't it? — so he will catch Mother at odd times. Father's resources, *à la rigueur*, are fortunately inexhaustible; so I can only trust Mother will ultimately decide to ignore me, and tell her friends at tea that I am in the country."

“But do you mean you will have no holidays?” persisted Charles, realising the thing slowly, as he leant against a pillar of the pergola.

“Very generous ones,” said Violet warmly. “Miss Lennox gives fifteen days in August regularly, turn about, of course; and a week at Christmas, and an occasional week-end. The weak-end sounds like weakness, don’t you think?” She shot a look at Charles side-long, of which Charles was just too late to catch the expression.

“But look here,” he said indignantly. “Aren’t you putting money into it?” He turned to face her.

“Father will insist,—and manage it probably, said Violet. “I am afraid he may have a bother with her. Miss Lennox is a person to be rather silly about money, I should say,—I mean, when she likes the people. I ought to have warned Father not to be too fascinating, if I had thought of it. . . . However, I gather Miss Eccles keeps Miss Lennox in order, in that and other things. I have a certain faith in our Miss Eccles, Mr. Shovell.”

“I expect she is interesting,” said Charles sarcastically.

“I am sure she is,” said Violet. “And she must not go, because we cannot spare her. You see, Miss Lennox calls her smart, and says she is a good girl at the core, but attracts the wrong kind of customers; by which Miss Lennox means the *other* kind. And

her mother drinks, poor dear, and Miss Lennox wants to persuade them to live in a Garden City. Yes," said Violet, as Charles ejaculated, "it seemed to me painfully *mal à propos*, but I could not tell her so. Her intentions are really all so excellent. As it is, Miss Eccles lives at Brixton, wherever that is,—and I am longing to make her acquaintance."

"And her mother's?" said Charles.

"She may be fond of her all the same," said Violet, blushing faintly. She paused a moment. "I wish Mother drank,—but she only dazzles. It is so much more dangerous to the community."

"That's overdoing it," thought Charles. He was capable to-day of noting Violet's faults, and he thought she put it on a little; on the subject of her mother. The last speech, at least, must have been composed in advance, and intended to crumple him. He refused to be crumpled, and preserved a superior line.

He said,—looking at the view with his far-sighted eyes, and looking extremely handsome and sulky,— "I believe the old female discouraged you thoroughly, only you won't admit it."

"Out of — what?" smiled Violet.

"Oh, feminine contumaciousness. I am sure your governor didn't care for it, anyhow."

"So am I," said Violet. "I shall have to talk to my governor again. He spoke in his clicking tone

several times, and his sleepwalking once, and I could see Miss Lennox's back hair trembling. From now till Tuesday, Mr. Shovell, I shall enter on campaigns. Won't you even wish me joy of them?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Charles.

But he felt rude and dissatisfied; and the occasional glimpse of Violet's grey eyes, which, charming as they were, had a glimmer of mischief at moments, did not add to his general contentment.

She was not quite what he had thought her. He could not longer conceal the sad fact from himself. Not content to remain his private cynosure, a gracefully-shrouded mystery, she pushed through the clouds he had provided, and challenged his judgment in the paths of common life. This was rash of her. Yet he was sure, still, that he knew her better than her proceedings suggested she knew herself. He could have warned her that in this pursuit she was daring a fate, the fate of her own personality, that must ultimately recoil upon her head. She was young, of course! — and very prettily impulsive, as the mere man in Charles admitted; but his saner discernment assured him, for his consolation, that she could not possibly keep it up. The *mal à propos* of the smart forewoman to Miss Lennox, or of her red-nosed mother to a Garden City, was not more striking, to Charles' mind, than the blank inappropriateness of Violet Ashwin to all or either.

Long before that instructive walk was over,— and they wandered for a considerable period, idly talking, about the grounds,— Charles, skilled in quiet observation and analysis of Nature's diverse phenomena, had Violet's character by heart, as his chronicler need not say.

It is just possible that Dr. Ashwin's daughter had his as well.

VIII

THE SCHEMER

HE was convinced that everybody saw as he did, with the exception of the wilful heroine.

Charles easily saw things as he wished to see them; and when the wandering couples re-united, to take early tea on the loggia in front of the garden entrance to the house, he was soon able to mark a protest in every attitude — even in that of Bob Brading, who had probably been persuading Margery to take a reasonable view of her cousin's caprices, during their prolonged inspection of the fowl-run in the field. Dr. Ashwin had also been dragged round the estate by the enthusiast, his host, but Charles thought it highly improbable that their conversation had been of peas exclusively. However it may have been, the bar on Claude's brow had disappeared; and though his hay-fever was worse than ever, that mental fever, which the Rector minded for him more, had abated under the Glasswell influences. He looked, to those who remembered, more like old days.

Mr. Shepherd had gone about his duties to church, and Maud to hers among the school-children; but

Mrs. Gibbs and Miss Lennox, left in close confabulation under the mulberry-tree, had threshed out everybody's affairs to admiration, and could greet the re-assembling family, from their upper moral level, with a benignant smile.

"He's a hopeless townee," the Rector was saying, as he arrived upon the scene. "He thinks nothing of my strawberry-pots, and he sneezes — literally — at my hay."

"Did Peacock take you through the greenhouse?" said the hostess, as she handed the doctor his tea.

"Dear me, we forgot Peacock," said the Rector; and the family laughed unkindly. Though the Rector and his gardener were the best of friends, a fierce rivalry was supposed, by the disrespectful, to exist.

"It would have been useless, anyhow," Charles informed him. "Violet — ah, Miss Ashwin — and I called at the Vane-Peacock cottage in passing, but the V-P was out, so we left a card."

"My card," said Violet.

"He had gone to church," said Charles, "we judged acutely, since his best hat was not there."

"I judged," said Violet.

"Well, I judged just after you," said Charles.

"Church?" said Robert Brading, with a singular intonation. Looking round, his eye happened to catch Dr. Ashwin's, which was half-obsured by his

pocket-handkerchief, and he decided not to press the point for the moment. He remained awakened and attentive, however. Charles, having settled Violet, ran on.

“When the governor had ascertained, in a lengthy interview, that the V-P’s attitude to pea-sticks was all that could be desired, he had an afterthought, turned back, and said he supposed he was a Churchman. Only if the V-P, with his ineffable good-breeding, had replied that his family had been Parsees for generations, the governor would have engaged him just the same.”

“All gardeners are Parsees, I think,” murmured Violet, who, since Charles was occupied, was handing tea.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Charles,” said his mother, “and don’t let Violet serve you like that. Of course,” she proceeded, turning to the doctor, “we should not think of unduly influencing anybody; but if the man’s respectable, and a regular attendant, it’s all to the good, I say.”

“Certainly,” said Claude, gazing fixedly at his tea. He waited, expecting a comment from his brother-in-law on the subject of his handsome gardener’s regular attendance, but none came. The Rector, in a beehive chair, was looking absently benevolent, and thinking, no doubt, of Peacock’s impeccable attitude towards garden produce.

"I should have liked terribly to talk to him," said Violet plaintively. "And to look at him too."

"Why deprive others?" said Claude, shifting his glance on her an instant. "You came here to be talked to, and to be looked at,— or so I understood."

"No, no," said the Rector quickly, awaking at the tone. "Let her be, Claude; Miss, under my roof, chooses her own company."

Violet's faint colour had risen, but her attentive eyes, undismayed, moved from her father to her uncle's kind face. It needed no effort, for one of her blood, to read all that was there, indeed. She swept it up, and acted without hesitation. Passing across she sank down beside him upon the beehive chair.

"I sat between Aunt Henrietta and Miss Lennox for more than an hour," she informed him, "and they investigated me exhaustively. Aunt Henrietta shook her head rather the most, but I have reason to hope they have not ploughed me utterly,— oh, mercy, *plucked*, I mean. But I thought they needed leisure to talk me over before they settled, do you see? So I went a walk with Charles."

The speech was delivered in her naturally soft tone, but it reached the ears of the entire company. Some quality in her neat detached utterance always ensured attention, and lent importance, as it were, to her easy use of the name. Mrs. Gibbs was taken unaware, and her eyes fell consciously. She

was still criticising Violet as a stranger, and was not prepared to be adopted so readily, or wooed in such a wistful little tone. She and Lois had reached the conclusion,— she leading,— that this stylishly bred girl was too ornamental to be profound. Violet's manner was always against her with that large utilitarian section of the community who suspect decoration of concealing deficiency, and have no inkling of that native need, appertaining to the artistic, for finishing all things, even manners and movements, to the last tolerable degree. Violet was self-conscious: and self-consciousness is to be pitied, by this standard, only when the results are unsuccessful. When they are striking or original, it is condemned. And a pose of whatever sort implies underlying instability.

Now, challenged by the girl herself, in the very manner they had been disparaging, they were both evidently disturbed, and had to look to their defences. Miss Lennox, blushing but dutiful, took the word.

“ We never had a doubt, my dear,” she said, “ that you would do your best: or indeed, that your best is very good. The question is really, if it is not too good,— I mean, considering all our circumstances. I believe,”— she smiled timidly in Dr. Ashwin's direction,— “ I believe your father is of my opinion, kind though he is about it, really.”

Violet's father was debarred from prompt reply by a crisis of his disease: his daughter took an unfair advantage of him.

"Father thinks as I do," she said calmly. "Or at least, he will in an hour's time. You must make allowances for him, Miss Lennox. He is naturally low-spirited to-day, owing to the hay and other causes ——"

"Look here,— I won't have it," Claude was heard to articulate.

"He is almost an invalid," pursued Violet, gathering intensity, "and I was perfectly selfish to drag him down in all this dust. I am selfish,— born so,— but he will feel better as soon as we enter the suburbs; and by the time we reach Harley Street he will be completely quite himself."

"And in your hands completely quite," said Mr. Gibbs. "Well, well, Claude; we all fall a victim to 'em, sooner or later."

In his heart, turning over his late conversation with the victim of feminine guile, he thanked Providence that Claude, in the prolonged and profound disillusion of his married life, had this child as consolation. Eveleen was grand, no doubt, considered as a social institution; but she was no wife for a man who had any claim to heart. That heart, as soon as conquered, she had starved assiduously, and had come as near as woman can to wrecking that

inner life, of which Mr. Gibbs thought more than of the outer, by nature not profession. Margaret's brother had escaped the sandy shoals of bitterness, he perceived, by one of those tacks of which a supple mind is capable; he was still exploring life with untired curiosity, but the skies, as it were, were changed; and it was that long losing battle for his ideals, in Eveleen's company, that had indubitably changed them. He had abandoned the contest, conquered creditably, and now sought the ideal elsewhere: groped for it, the Rector would have said, if anyone could have connected the idea of groping with such as Claude. One of his rescued hopes in that threatened catastrophe he had pinned to Violet; and though it was a slight one, Mr. Gibbs seemed to see his cautious eye watching it from time to time. She was not a son; but she was a girl of singular spirit. The spirit that died so hard in the Ashwins was revived, as it were, in her. She appeared subtle, but it was no more than a trick of her femininity; for the Rector, who had the natural eye for character it was his wife's pride to have acquired, believed her to be straight.

Her little speech from his chair, uttered fearlessly before her differing critics, was a thrust straight for the mark, and before he had time to criticise, he applauded it. Withal, it was kind,—like the Ashwins again,—a personal kindness to him; for Violet had

penetrated his anxiety that his wife should be drawn within the family ring, and had had the aptitude to guess that she, her mother's representative, must accomplish it. Till she spoke, the Rector had hardly known his own desire. It was at once acute and sweet, and, remembering Margaret, he could have embraced her in acknowledgment of an effort so worthy of her origin. That it had been an effort he did not doubt,— he had been too near her when she spoke, and had seen her slight hand clench upon the chair. Such as Violet, it may be mentioned, are not allowed to be shy; but she was shy, as her father was; and the Rector, happily exempt himself from that curse of our society, did full justice to her while his wife was doing half. He could only appeal to that wife with his eyes to clinch the situation, and take her accustomed lead.

"There is nothing for it," said Mrs. Gibbs, pleasantly enough, "but for Violet to try in the morning for a day or two, if her mother approves, and see how she gets on."

The Rector's face cleared. "How's that, miss?" he said.

"Almost perfect," said Violet tranquilly. "Perfect, if the mornings I chose had afternoons attached, starting from Tuesday next at nine o'clock, and if Miss Eccles would spare one hour of her valuable time to give me a lesson in machining."

Dr. Ashwin's features twisted, and Miss Lennox cleared her throat. Charles made a carefully audible sound of disgust. The Rector, having looked round him, expressed the general feeling.

"We can't think of you as a machine-maiden," he told her. "An expensive handmaid, if you like."

"How — wonderfully — *clever*," said Violet, dwelling upon him with large eyes. "*Was* that what you had meant?" She turned about.

"I was thinking it out," said Claude. "I should have said it presently." He produced his little engagement-book, and toyed with it suggestively. "Tuesday next is the Eton match," he said. "Had you not promised the Blairs to go down?"

"Father dear, how feeble," said Violet, in a piteous tone. "Of course I shall explain to Lady Hilda, this evening, in a note."

"How?" said nearly everybody. They seemed quite relieved to concentrate forces upon a common point.

"How I shall explain?" Violet looked at them innocently, one by one. "Well, let me see: I shall begin, *dearest* Lady Hilda, rather large,—I am hideously sorry to be a broken reed, but, as I am *sure* you understand, my work claims quite *all* my time. And, if it was not for the *hay*, Father might replace me,—since I happen to know he has marked it carefully in his horrid little book. And then a

little more imbecility, and then that our *hearts* will be with the dear school always. And a squirly signature,—and Lady Hilda will think it quite all right, because it is just the kind of thing she would have written herself, if she had been in my position.”

“Or if she hadn’t,” said the Rector.

“I think,” said Violet, “that would be circumstantial enough not to be classed as a mere excuse.”

“Good Lord,—she is shattering.” Mr. Gibbs collapsed in his chair dramatically. “Then you think your smart friends will give you up without a struggle, do you?” he enquired, curling a tendril of her hair.

“Of course I do,” said Violet. “I am only a girl to Lady Hilda, and people of her nature.” She thought a little. “Yes: I am probably a ‘presentable extra girl,’ when she is making up lists with Mr. Blair, since Mother’s dressmaker is the same as hers. Father, I am tolerably certain, is a presentable extra man. Several people who live near Windsor are like that — I am sure the poor King can’t help it —”

“Stop her,” said Claude definitely, putting away his handkerchief and sitting up, “and order the car. On the subject of the Monarchy, she is more than I can bear, in my invalided condition. It is as much as my position is worth to listen to it, really —”

"She was only pitying him, Uncle Claude," laughed Margery.

"That is the form her loyalty takes. She will be pitying him audibly the day she is presented, probably ——"

"I shall, indeed," said Violet, with feeling. "All those hours, poor man,—and such quantities of plainish girls."

"Well, pity me for a change," said the doctor, rising. "Because unless we get off within nine minutes, and you begin your last words instantly, I shall have no time to dress ——"

"And will fail even to be presentable," said the Rector. "Lord, lord: how thankful I am that I have not to live up to your standards."

"The Church are always presentable," Violet consoled him. "All they have to do, is to look benignant. You could walk into a royal death-bed just as you are,—couldn't he, Aunt Henrietta? Or with just a friendly hand to put your tie straight."

"I should not wonder," said Mrs. Gibbs, rather dismayed to be appealed to on such a subject; for conscientious as she was, neither her imagination nor her humour were equal to a sudden stretch, more especially on Sunday afternoon. She rather wondered that Arthur tolerated such frivolities; but Arthur's brow was still bland, and his eyes on the girl rather thoughtful. He seemed to be seeing

more in her than Mrs. Gibbs' trained eye could see; but then it was true, girls of Violet's stamp had not often stepped her way. She supposed,— her imagination was just equal to it,— that the first Margaret had been something like that; but if it was so, she could not avoid thankfulness that “ the girls,”— her girls,— resembled Margaret so little.

IX

THE VISIT CONCLUDES

"SHE seems clever," said Mrs. Gibbs to Violet's father when, summoned by the panting of the car, the party moved at last towards the gate. "Have you never thought of sending her to college? College life does so much for girls."

"So they tell me," he replied. He found it hard to talk to Mrs. Gibbs, but screwed out phrases conscientiously. "I remember my sister enjoyed Newnham. That was your college also, was it not? I went to see her once."

"Only once? Surely you were up at the same time?"

"Equally up," he said dryly. "I'd have flown to her if I could." He added for her enlightenment. "The North Western service was no joke in those days."

"Oh, Oxford," said Mrs. Gibbs, still superior. "But — science at Oxford — I thought ——"

"I didn't read science," he inserted. Then, remarking that he had put her out more than he intended, he harked back in a hurry to the former

point. "I don't know much of the young person, naturally," he said. "But don't you consider, sometimes, that life in the crowd rather swamps personality? Especially at that age? It is true," he added in haste, "Margaret recovered hers later on; but she was of a firmer constitution altogether."

"Do you think Violet not strong, then?" said his hostess presently. His rapid tacking in dialogue puzzled her, as it had puzzled many before. He was simply feeling for her level, had she known.

"There is room for anxiety," he answered evasively, his brow showing the bar. As a rather heavy silence fell between them, he made a new effort, and said,— "Eveleen calls me fussy,"— and then gave her a single glance of his dark eye that seemed appealing.

Now, Mrs. Gibbs could naturally not imagine that a married physician, with ten to twelve letters after his name, could appeal to her on the subject of the bodily health of his own offspring,—in which we may perhaps admit that she betrayed her ignorance of men and doctors. The result was that the short interview left her confirmed in her impression of the girl's instability; or, as she put it impressively to her husband in their room that night,—that the curse of Reuben shadowed her.

"But the Ashwins do excel, my dear," expostulated the Rector. "That is just where they disturb

all application of Biblical judgments. This one excelled the lot of us to-day. Did you observe, the minx came out top in the end, with actually the promise of a 'little note' from Miss Lennox to-night? Now, I am sure Miss Lennox would never have committed herself as far as that by your advice. Though she is unbusiness-like from birth, she must know the force of such engagements. And if I know anything of the other side, the money will change hands before the week's out. 'A long telegram to Mother' seems the only necessary formality,—and that is formality simply."

"I can't countenance it, really," said Mrs. Gibbs, with years of anxious responsibility for others making lines in her brow.

"Nor can I, nor Claude,—nor Charles, to judge by appearances. But I imagine Miss will dispense with all our countenances, if necessary."

"She is wilful," said Mrs. Gibbs. "Spoilt girls are often that."

"By the way," said the Rector, to turn the subject, "what is her position with Charles, do you suppose?"

"I suppose he admires her," said Mrs. Gibbs. "She is not the first."

"Was Margery the next before?" asked the Rector, with some natural anxiety.

"No," said Charles' mother. "I believe we can

congratulate Margery on her total escape. She indulges the boy absurdly, that is all. However," she added soon, "we must try to prevent the girls from making a joke of his attachment to Violet, for that is the way to turn him serious. I happen to know Charles."

"I wouldn't dispute your knowledge of him," said the Rector. "But I think for that very reason you are hard on him sometimes. As I am still a mere external acquaintance, I like the boy."

His wife answered nothing, but her face in the glass wore its heaviest lines.

"My dear," said the Rector, "it simply does not do to take some kinds of young men too seriously. I have been one, and I know. With one's own children, it is fatal. I was lecturing Claude on exactly that this afternoon. He is absurdly sensitive about Violet,—turns all colours of the rainbow when one suggests she's looking thin. You're the same. You give out to be a strong-minded pillar of your sex, and I took you in faith as such; but on the subject of that fellow downstairs, one could, at any minute, knock you down with a feather."

"You're scolding me," said Mrs. Gibbs, with the surprised complacency of one who has been driven by circumstances for twenty years to keep the upper hand, and then of her own will yielded up the reins.

"I am not: I am gracefully expostulating." He

touched her in passing to a drawer. "You see, I prefer my pillars upright."

"And now you're flirting," said she, more complacently still.

"The way you misuse words," said the Rector. "You ought to go to Violet to learn the language."

Presently her spirits rose enough to carry the war into the enemy's country. "That young Brading seems to get no farther with Margery," she said.

"It's uphill work for him," said the Rector. "She gives him nothing but monosyllables, the tiresome hussy. However," he added, more contentedly, "Claude seemed to think it was all right."

"You mean you consulted him?" cried Mrs. Gibbs.

"No. He gave me his opinion. I hadn't even noticed Robert was sweet on her, till he spoke. But Claude has a high opinion of Bob, and he has an old acquaintance with the family. It seems my young gentleman called with a note from his father while she was there in Harley Street, and Claude told him the maidens were engaged. He's a proper chaperon now, isn't he?" The Rector beamed.

"Perhaps he thought it was Violet," said Mrs. Gibbs.

"No, he didn't; he made sure it was Margery, though how, I forget. His unmanly subtleties are beyond me. I should say," added the Rector, turn-

ing absent, "that between the pair of them, they'll marry Violet well."

"The Ashwins? I should hope so,—if they get her off their hands at all. That's what I wouldn't be sure of."

"Wouldn't you?" thought the Rector; and pondered on the subject of maternal jealousy; for he knew Henrietta's real feelings to Charles.

"Eveleen's got a French marquee for Violet up her sleeve," he observed, with another effort to be worldly, after an interval.

"Good gracious,—poor girl!" said Mrs. Gibbs, with such genuine and heartfelt fervour, that it put an end to the conversation.

As a matter of fact, Violet did not talk at all to her father on the way to London; for he was in a hurry, and chose to drive.

He explained to his chauffeur that he was used to the cross-roads in that part of the country, but the chauffeur, though he accepted the excuse, knew better. Dr. Ashwin kept his servants up to the mark by habitually excelling them in their special lines. In the rush of the season he out-worked his secretary, out-talked his counsel when he went to law, and entirely out-manœuvred the agent of his country estate. He drove quite as well as the expert he employed, and with far more studied reckless-

ness; and he had only brought him upon the Glasswell expedition because he had ladies,—that is, his niece and daughter,—to entertain.

Violet was well used to his pretensions, and saw him mount in front of her without much surprise. She merely exchanged a large-eyed look of sympathy with the ousted professional, when he came round, according to directions, to tuck her comfortably into her seat behind.

“Does he mean to scorch, Joliffe?” she said in her plaintive tone.

“Short time, miss,” said Joliffe. “So I understand.”

“Well, it’s not my fault this time,” said Violet. “*All* the last words were his. Please tell the police that, if necessary.”

“I’ll see to it,” said Joliffe, with exquisite propriety. “*You’ll* be all right, Miss Violet. Nothing further, is there?”

Violet thanked him, and subsided among her cushions and rugs. It was noticeable that neither she nor Joliffe thought of an accident,—merely of the police. Accidents did not figure in those situations of which “the doctor,” had control. Lofty, impenetrable, feminine security hedged about Violet, with those two determined and devoted figures on the seat before her. For all her emotional inward sufferings, she was accustomed in life to such security.

Only one hitch in their journey' actually occurred, and that was near the outset. Turning the second of the sharp angles in the road leading out of the village to the highway, the party encountered a man. He was a tall man, very well and quietly dressed, who had stopped in the middle of the road to whistle to a large black dog. At Dr. Ashwin's peremptory warning, the dog hurried out of the way; but the man did not move instantly; and when he did, was only just beyond reach of the wheels in time. It was a sharply anxious moment for all parties, till they saw him safe.

"The d — d fool!" ejaculated Joliffe at the crucial moment, moved out of his stately calm. Claude merely grimaced viciously as the car shot by. As for the man, he stood on the pathway, gazing after it in dignified reproach, and holding his dog, a precaution which, as a mere glance at the animal showed, was quite unnecessary.

Having passed without mishap, Dr. Ashwin slackened at once, and turned round to his daughter. Violet had half risen from her seat, and was gazing backward along the road, her loosened veils fluttering behind her.

"No harm done," her father called to her.

"It isn't *that*," Violet called back, a note of strong emotion in her tone.

"Good," said her father, and resumed the pace.

Presently the man beside him ventured on a remark, for the figure on the pathway had impressed him at a second scrutiny.

“Near thing, sir,” he suggested.

“Saved his skin that time,” said the doctor lightly.

“Gentlemen should know better,” said Joliffe.

“Gentlemen should,” his master agreed; and Joliffe, glancing at him, surprised a smile upon his face. It was a relief to his conscientious mind; for he was more than a little afraid of “the doctor”; and if it really was a gentleman his master had so nearly killed, Joliffe had used an unguarded adjective.

“Will you tell your poor Gardener,” Violet wrote to Margery, “I am very sorry that Father frightened him in the road. And since I am sure he is not the kind of person to *boast* of it, I had better mention he saved Erasmus from a *violent death*. I am not the least surprised, knowing what dear Erasmus is to you all, that he (Peacock) looked absolute Daggers at Father, whose carelessness is rapidly becoming proverbial, and will certainly culminate in Transportation for someone, though probably not for him. The criminal’s identity was Masked; but I called out to Peacock how sorry I was, and I believe Joliffe did too. And if P. did take our number in his natural resentment, ask him for the Family’s sake,

darling, not to prosecute. I hope he did not have to trample on Erasmus's dear toes. The bridge of his nose (P.'s) is a dream, as Charles observed, and the way his hair grows at the side a Revelation. You must simply do his portrait for the Pastellists in October, or never more call me friend.

“Yours, very lonely without you,
“V. I. A.”

PART II
LENNOXES



I

THE STICKING-PLACE

MRS. CLAUDE ASHWIN arrived at Victoria, some six days later than the date first indicated to her household, with two gentlemen in attendance, one of whom was French.

“Oh, my husband seems to be there,” she mentioned as the train drew up; and disappointment overspread the Frenchman’s countenance, though the Englishman’s was blank. They could only vie with one another to extract her smaller baggage from the train, and even so she did not thank them, being occupied in mentioning a few intensely important particulars concerning the larger trunks’ contents to her husband’s private ear. The doctor was a stranger to the younger of the pair of escorts, though the other seemed to know him slightly. He received, on the part of the foreigner, a very penetrating scrutiny, to which, though he knew precisely what it portended, it would have been impossible for man to appear more indifferent.

“There,” said Eveleen, when all the men, porters included, had finished skirmishing about her, and

calm was restored,— “ I meant to introduce you to M. de Fervolles, but he seems to have disappeared.” She appeared barely to regret the oversight.

“ I daresay he will turn up within the week,” said Claude. “ Did you give him your address? ”

“ Good gracious no,” said Eveleen. “ He can find it if he wants to. He knows London as well as you do,” she added.

“ His English ought to be better then,” said Claude.

“ Oh well,— I said you would speak French if he wanted.” Mrs. Ashwin settled back in the carriage, her fine eyes following the familiar movement of the London streets. “ He plays billiards,” she added, to help matters a little.

Her husband laughed, which put her out. She had saved this last fact carefully, as likely to appeal to Claude, if he chose to be disagreeable on the subject of the Marquis de Fervolles. He did not seem exactly disagreeable, and he was always attentive, but he never behaved quite as Eveleen expected.

Her only reply to the misplaced laugh was slightly to roll out her lower lip, a facial trick of hers that became her. Eveleen had never been called pretty, or even charming, and people only used the word beautiful about her doubtfully. That is, people in London did. Other societies across the Channel

were prodigal of discriminating epithets, never less than appreciative. The Transatlantic hit the mark still more simply with the epithet "stunning," which certainly suited her best of all. Since nature had made her stunning, Mrs. Ashwin did not put herself out much to improve on it, except by devoting a certain portion of her attention to matters of dress. And even that portion was barely necessary, if one made arrangements to pass through the "right places" in Paris twice a year. Choosing, in those temples of taste, was fortunately superfluous; one merely had to show oneself, and approve,—or disapprove,—according to the circumstances. The "right places" delighted in Eveleen, and Eveleen was made for them. Even her thrift amused the officiating priests within them: for she frequently emerged with all she wanted, and having spent half as much as her less contented friends. This time she had been economical, as she told Claude when he remarked on the contents of her purse. He would never have asked to see them, of course, but that the car happened to pass a convenient office, and she gave him her money to change.

"A pound of that is de Fervolles'," she observed carelessly. "You might remind me when I see him: or pay him yourself."

"Right," said Claude, and went about her business. She leant back in the car, looking at the street,

and a certain contentment crept over her face. When he returned, she had a smile for him.

"It's rather nice to be back, you know," she explained it. "There's nowhere like London, really."

"You come to it fresh," said he. "That's right, Joliffe,— home."

"Are you tired?" said Eveleen, after an interval, with a glance at his face, which she had hardly yet observed.

"No; but the season is, rather," he said. "If I were you, I should get out of it soon. There are loads of invitations."

"Yours or mine?"

"Both," he answered gravely. "You can choose."

She considered a little, her lip rolled slightly. "Have you answered any of them?"

"No. I waited for directions."

"Well, I have no wish to move. I am particularly well, as it happens."

His eyes had already told him that, and it was inconceivable for Evie to be otherwise; yet the saying relieved his mind, for it was a sign of her general satisfaction with life, and he asked no more than to satisfy her. He still held her money absently and was only reminded when she extended her hand.

"I have saved all that," she said complacently, when he poured the gold into her glove. She closed

her hand upon it, considering. "I wish there was a decent dressmaker in London," she said.

Her serenity was so perfect that he asked — "Ideally or practically?"

"I want her," said Eveleen simply. "They make in Paris, they don't make over. I shan't touch those new things till the autumn, naturally," she pursued.

"Aren't we worthy of them?" he protested.

"No." She fixed him with her fine eyes. "Perhaps, if de Fervolles dined with us — but even so ——" Diverting her eyes, she pondered.

"Isn't that girl you have any good?" said Claude, after an interval of consideration on his side. "Where is she, by the way?"

"Léontine? She's not bad. She stopped behind at Argenteuil with her ridiculous family."

"Good gracious! Why?" He was roused, for he minded much more than she did the machinery of the house being disturbed.

"Oh, she seemed seedy one day, and was useless, so I let her go to them. I couldn't be bothered. She developed something — what did they call it — ?" He had made an anxious movement, and, playing with him as a cat plays, she feigned to forget the word. "Fluxion, that's it. I've no notion what it means, but I supposed it was not infectious, or they would have told me."

“No,” he simply said.

After a pause in the half-light, she laughed softly. “Frightened, weren’t you, Claude,” she said. “Was it for me, or Violet?”

She still got no answer, so, with something the annoyance of a feline at such neglect, she held her wrist to him.

“Feel it, do,” she invited. “Sometimes it amuses me.”

She meant his physician’s manner; and, obedient to the challenge, he felt her velvet wrist. Eveleen knew, by the touch of his fingers, for all their composed, accustomed movements, that he was still her helpless prey. Why she had chosen to enslave him, she could hardly say,—or perhaps, she had forgotten. It might have been because he was one of the men who have no natural taste to be enslaved, and who would have been quite content in studious solitude unmated. He had been on the edge of slipping from the struggle when Eveleen found him, with all his laurels, University and otherwise, still unfaded at his feet. This would have been a thousand pities, since his brains were of the kind that have a market value. So Eveleen married, and employed him in her interest, not to mention the world’s, with quite remarkable success. Society should certainly have been grateful to her, and doubtless was; at least, society talked of him freely, flocked to his door, gilt

his doorstep in the usual manner in the mornings, and not infrequently, during the afternoon, fell in love with his wife.

Eveleen's judgment in material things was sure, and she had never been tempted to regret the step she had taken in marrying him, though it had been considered a throw so risky as to verge on the romantic, by her more sober advisers. She had her choice of titles even then,—but what are titles, seriously regarded? They save little trouble in life, and not uncommonly add to it. Claude saved her trouble in all directions, diverted her in her duller intervals, and was most creditable and convenient. A whole group of people in the Olympian upper walks of London society, undoubtedly superior, and traditionally rather inattentive to feminine charms, smiled upon Eveleen because of Claude. He was well-derived too, as she had discovered with surprise since her marriage, and had family records to show of which no one adopting the name need be ashamed. Eveleen, in short, rather plumed herself on the alliance as time went on, and her discontented connections, very wisely, shut their mouths, and allowed its accustomed meed to her flair and foresight.

She liked to tease Claude occasionally, of course; teasing a clever man is so amusing. She had suspected, by various accounts not his own, that he had enjoyed his bachelorhood of late; whereas she,

in the tiresome business of the maid, had actually felt the want of him. She intended therefore to revenge herself a little, before they settled into their peculiar partnership again. He was tired to-night, which made his emotions the easier to play upon.

She had touched the emotion by the mention of his daughter's name, and he merely waited her pleasure to reach that subject. It was bound to come; for, though Eveleen envisaged circumstances slowly, she had now had nearly a week to take in the elaborate telegram he and his daughter in collusion had despatched.

It came at last. "How's Violet?" said Eveleen, on the tail of a slight yawn, as they were nipped in the nightly traffic of Bond Street, and their lordly course delayed.

"She is as usual," said Claude. "She was disappointed not to hear from you."

"Oh, of course, I supposed it was all right; that you would see to it, I mean. Girls are like that nowadays," she added, looking out.

"Not all of them," he retorted.

"The majority. Violet is not the least singular, really; she only requires to be thought so." A pause. "I daresay you indulged her," said Eveleen.

"In thinking that? I do think her singular, yes. There is only one of her in the world."

"Claude, I won't have it," she said sharply. She

alluded to his "sleep-walking" tone, to which she objected even more than Margery Gibbs. She had said so more than once.

"I beg your pardon," he said, waking. "We will talk things over this evening. The child is longing to start."

"Has she not started? The telegram said Tuesday."

"It also said, she was waiting for your consent."

"My silence was consent, I suppose."

"I supposed that too. But you must have known she would not accept it as such. She wants the maternal signature."

Eveleen laughed again. "Well, who made her a tiresome little prude? — I didn't," she said lazily.

"That means you sign, then?" he pressed her swiftly: too swiftly a little, and as though aware of the pressure, she drew in her feelers at once.

"You are never really 'rasant,' " she observed, "except on this one subject. What does it matter if I sign, as you call it, or not? She'll do it all the same."

He left it there, with the expert's instinct, and let her turn the subject to trivialities. Though he never confessed it to himself, he knew Eveleen's mind through and through, and managed it perfectly, allowing unconsciously for a certain absolute slowness it had in grasping new material. The news of

Violet's mild revolt might even possibly have shocked her, and she be unwilling to betray the emotion. He watched for such natural stirring in his wife, as he would have watched for muscular movement in a paralysed patient; but as yet she would not even show annoyance. She looked about her with untroubled eyes, and saw the world to which she was accustomed. He admired, as often before, that splendid healthy impassivity, a quality of the gods, taking all and giving nothing, letting others grope and batter themselves against its rock-like front in vain.

Once in youth, during a phase of classical researches, Violet had asked him what Helen of Troy was really like; and he had replied unhesitatingly, "Like your mother." Then he had regretted it, for the twelve-year-old child had looked at him, without replying, and with a certain delicate reproach.

Violet was waiting for them now, when they reached the house. Graceful as usual, and considerate of people's tastes, she made no disturbance. She dawned like a white spirit on the background of the hall as her mother entered, and greeted her with decorum. Eveleen kissed her placidly, touching with approbation the arrangement of her hair. She did not really object to Violet, who took the post provided for her on the stage of her mother's social success with discretion, and filled it adroitly;

or, to put it more in Eveleen's manner, who generally looked nice in the right places.

"Dinner is at eight-fifteen," observed Violet. "I hope that will give you time?" She seemed earnest and anxious, as a good hostess might have seemed.

Violet on her side did not dislike her mother, unless in passing flashes, when her father was badly worried: but from the age of ten years she had despised her tranquilly. She never gave Eveleen the slightest indication of this attitude, for she obeyed her with attention, and addressed her with the same plaintive politeness she showed to all the world. She would have been horrified if anyone had accused her of deceit, but her precocious pent-up wits were naturally subtle, and she had hitherto deceived her mother as easily as she had circumvented her father: the isolation that resulted forming her private tragedy. It was a genuine tragedy enough, for a child of her age, and had comprised for a sensitive child, seasons of very genuine suffering; but of late years, as she thrust the childhood she disdained behind her, her acquaintance, rapidly growing, with her father's mind, and his unfailing care and tenderness for her, mind and body, had made isolation far more tolerable, to say the least.

At present she was merely anxious for the credit of her housekeeping, and trusted she had allowed her mother time to dress.

"Is anyone coming?" said Eveleen, picking up a letter or two.

"Only one of Violet's old men," said Claude, as he hung up his coat. "Lucas Warden."

"I thought you would like a fourth," deprecated Violet. "And Mr. Warden is harmless. Besides, he can play billiards: at least, Father says he does to practice on, *faute de mieux*."

"Is he listening?" enquired Eveleen, glancing through the letter she had picked up. Her expressive lip had rolled out slightly.

"I left him in the drawing-room," said Violet. "The door is shut."

"Then I won't have billiards to-night," said the mistress of the house.

"Mr. Warden will be thankful," said Violet gravely. She glanced at her father, half in sympathy, half challenging him to resist. He did not always resist, she considered, sufficiently; though he was quite capable, at need, of overturning such petty tyranny.

"We have weighty matters to discuss," he said, putting his hand behind her hair. It was exactly the same gesture that his wife had made, but Violet felt the difference.

"Oh!" Her brows went up. "Then shall I tell Mr. Warden he is *de trop*? I quite thought Mother would be too tired to-night."

"I am not the least tired, child," said Eveleen, frowning slightly. Any hint of managing her brought that frown, and Violet sometimes betrayed a slightly spinsterish gift of management. As to her daughter's "old men," she had no objection to them; especially to the present one, a gay bachelor publisher of forty-nine, a frequent habitu   of the house, and an avowed admirer of her own. She was, however, jealous of Claude's billiards, as of most of the keen interests that caught or claimed his passing attention; and she had not the least desire for a *t  te-  -t  te* with the "child," who inherited the tiresome tongue of her father's family, and might very probably dodge or defeat her, if she summoned no men to her support. For this reason Eveleen gathered the men, her accustomed phalanx, about her, during the meal and afterwards; prolonging her sojourn in the dining-room with her usual grand deliberation in pursuit of her private aims; and had no difficulty in holding their attention, whether she talked or not.

But she had not reckoned with Violet's resources. Violet had on her own part summoned Mr. Lucas Warden, gaily surnamed her god-papa, to her service in advance. Plotting was rife at all times in Mrs. Ashwin's household; her presence seemed to inspire it. Mr. Warden knew all the circumstances in this instance, and was immensely tickled by them. The

idea of Violet pretending to be a working-woman was amusing to begin with; the idea of her outfacing her mother with such a preposterous proposal was more delicious still; and the idea of her demanding his collaboration in these projects was the best joke of all. Mr. Warden, an agreeable gamboller along the paths of life, took life's duties in general very easily; but he found he had to disturb himself seriously in Miss Ashwin's interest, before the end of the meal.

Old or "oldish" men invariably liked Violet, and in quite early youth she had owned a small circle of such. Mr. Warden was her own friend, appropriated to herself by ingenious effort as follows.

He had first fallen under her notice when he had been kind enough, at the instance of the lady who taught them, to show her and four friends, at the age of fifteen, round the collections in the British Museum. Greek art had not till then occupied Miss Ashwin's attention; but in its new connection with Mr. Warden's grey curls, brusque movements, wide sweet smile, and pleasant fashion of answering you seriously when you least expected it,—Greek art became a thing to be assimilated, first-hand and as rapidly as possible.

So Violet assimilated, ravaging the shelves of her father's library when he was out, and complaining

bitterly to the servants of the dust which was thus transferred from the volumes to her hands. Having cut the pages of the cleanest book with a silver knife, read an introductory chapter, and looked at all the illustrations, she put the volume aside, shut her lips, and wrote out a list of questions in a careful round hand. This she took the earliest opportunity of laying before her father's eyes.

"I expect you really know," she told him, "if you consider a little. You have been twice to Athens, and anyhow boys always learn those things at school."

Dr. Ashwin continued writing in a black notebook with a vulgar shining cover which was Violet's enemy, and said he required notice of the question.

"You are not considering," said Violet reproachfully. "You think I am teasing as usual, instead of trying, in the teeth of opportunity, to learn. If I have chosen the wrong minute, you know you have only to tell me so."

The elaboration of this, together with its neat utterance, suited Claude's taste exactly. He turned to her, apologised, offered her his whole attention for two minutes, gave her half her answers with decision, and admitted his ignorance of the rest.

"But if it's serious, Puss," he added, "I will write to Warden. He's the best man I can think of on the spur of the moment."

Violet coloured with pleasure at this unexpected coincidence, and, though she thanked her father gravely, never betrayed it was exactly what she wanted. Claude, who had known Lucas Warden slightly in college days, revived the acquaintance at their common club without difficulty, during one of his "odd moments"; and Violet, with even less delay, cemented the connection.

"Father's so absurdly busy, you know," she told him, "and I am always wanting to know things. I hope you don't object to bothering."

Lucas Warden was far from objecting; indeed, few men of approaching fifty could have resisted Violet Ashwin at fifteen. When they did not see one another, they corresponded solemnly. Violet possessed a genuine gift for the literary letter, which would not have escaped notice and appreciation in the days of her great-grandmother, and which, like her manner of talking, sent Mr. Warden off his grey-curved head with delight. Among her own generation, which admired bluntness, her studied speech was noted by girls as "mincing," and had a marked power to scare and outrage all mankind under thirty years. Only men already comfortably launched beyond the forties seemed to enjoy these flowers of utterance, as they fell from Violet's lips; men such as her father, her Uncle Arthur, and Mr. Warden above all.

The publisher, who, compared with the doctor, seemed to have a singular number of odd and other times to spare, invited himself often to his old friend Ashwin's house, found him a less stilted fellow than he recollected, his dinners admirable, his wife a picture, and his daughter a mine of innocent diversion. Violet was quite impossible, he told Ashwin in his gay manner, and only to be met with in books. She spoke in print, and moved in half-tone pictures. She was perfect natural refreshment from the obvious "vital" girl imposed by the age. She was civilised, sophisticated, attenuated, new to art. She was her own discovery, re-discovery rather. She must have looked herself up in the back of the book-shelves. Mr. Warden was, in fact, as enthusiastic on his side as his "god-daughter" was on hers. And the absurd appearance they presented together, and the serious partnership they professed, diverted Claude continually, though it seemed rather to annoy his wife.

II

ENTER MISS ECCLES

VIOLET sat now at the head of the table, for her mother abdicated calmly, preferring to face the guest, with whom she also almost exclusively conversed. Having registered the introduction of Mr. Warden into her social scheme as a success, Violet as housekeeper had no further doubts, for the cook was perfect, and a little earnest talk with that functionary at an early hour had provided for a faultless meal. She listened to the talk, helping herself at languid intervals to food, and smiling slightly at her father now and then.

Dr. Ashwin, though he inserted a few words in the dialogue whenever Warden, in the character of the lady's man, became too provocatively silly, was rather silent too, and took in Violet across the table very thoroughly, in an occasional piercing glance. He trusted she was not so unhappy as she appeared. That air of yearning misery she had at times, he told himself, was merely a trick of her face in repose, a chance interplay of pensive lashes and drooping lips. He supposed, since his wife told him so, she

was not pretty, but he liked her appearance. Her forehead and eyes were Margaret's. There was nothing classical in her features, but there was something pleasing,—vaguely wild amid her surroundings of solid comfort. Claude tried conscientiously at moments to lay aside all pre-disposition in the case of Violet, and see her through the eyes of other and younger men. He quite thought sometimes he had accomplished it, but he never did.

Violet, who had been convinced for whole days of despair that she was hideous, and only returned to temporary life when her hat was a success, or some stranger looked twice at her with the eye of approbation, felt the reassurance of her father's eyes upon her now. His taste, after all, was to be trusted. She drooped less and came to life as the meal went on. Lucas Warden had been gambolling idly for Eveleen's benefit, and enjoying an unusually free field. Violet began to slide dry little sallies into the conversation, and give him the provocation he needed to produce his best retorts. Claude, also turning his attention that way, discouraged Lucas's conclusions systematically, and discounted his statements; until, thus prodded by both, Mr. Warden began to drive his hair up with his fingers and roll his eyes at them in turn, as though recollecting that something was expected of him that he had half forgotten, in the lustre of Mrs. Ashwin's transcendent neighbourhood.

"Won't that do?" he enquired of Violet in a pause, having finished a particularly neat sentence.

"Yes," said Violet, as though summing up his conversational efforts, "that will about do. Now suppose we drop literature, and talk geography. Mother likes it just as well. They may smoke, I suppose, Mother, mayn't they?"

"Goodness yes," said Eveleen, rousing. "I've only my old clothes."

"They have been waiting to be reassured, poor dears," said Violet. "Because they can't be expected to know, can they? Mr. Warden can date anything up to the second century, but in the latter years of our era, he is quite at sea."

"I can't date you, I told your father so," said Warden. "All I am sure of is, you're out of date."

"An anachronism?" said Violet. "Oh, thank you: how nice it feels. Well, now, to turn to geography. It may be news to you, Father, that Mr. Warden and I, being both for different reasons out of work, went exploring to-day."

"I wasn't out of work," interposed Warden. "I had loads, but I neglected it."

"Where did you explore?" said Claude. "Not to the City again? I thought you said you had finished the churches, Warden."

"So we have. Strictly speaking, your daughter now knows her native town. To-day we went afield,

to the neighbouring villages." Mr. Warden, now smoking happily, waved a hand.

"We discovered Battersea," said Violet gently. "Do you know where Battersea is, Mother dear?"

"It's a pretty little place," Lucas murmured.

"I have seen the name written," said Eveleen, with deliberation.

"On a telegram?" Violet leant forward. "And before that on buses? Well, that was exactly the extent of my own knowledge also. But first Uncle Arthur, and then Miss Lennox, and then Mr. Warden, stimulated my imagination to such an extent, that we took one of the buses to-day, and pushed on — until we found it."

"Why not the carriage?" said Eveleen.

"Oh,—because a well-known society doctor was monopolising it; and we thought his researches might be more important than ours. Besides, a yellow omnibus is quite delicious, really."

"I assure you, I never knew of the plan till this minute, Evie," said Claude. "Or I'd have taken steps."

"As it was, we took them," said Warden. "I've not walked so much for years. The village, if remote, is extensive, unluckily."

"I took great care of Mr. Warden," said Violet. "Except just crossing the bridge, when the view was really so wonderful that I forgot him."

"The river Thames," Warden struck in, "beyond which Battersea — er — nestles,— came quite as a surprise to Miss Violet. Yet I pointed out it flows in sight of our town, and I had even hinted there was another side to it. On either side the river, I told her, lie the broad bus routes to Peckham Rye ———"

"You did not," said Violet. "You said there was nothing to look at that way worth a twopenny fare."

"Well, you proved there was," said Lucas. "I admit that. Good gracious,"— he combed his curls gently,— "I can't get over that girl."

"Girl?" said Eveleen, stirring. "Was it girls you went exploring for, then?"

"Not a bit of it, Mrs. Ashwin, on my word. I shut my eyes, and let Miss Violet call the tune. Her erratic impulses seemed to have a guiding star somewhere unseen, and, though she walked me off my legs, and consulted any number of policemen, I trusted her blindly. Result: I turned up an old friend, and as pretty a girl as you could see on a summer's day. And weren't they fighting just," he added to Violet. "Oh no. For all their subsequent civility to us, the fur had been flying about that room. I saw little bits of it, lying round."

"Oh dear me," said Violet bitterly, "how badly you tell a story. I wish I had not left it to you. I don't wonder poor Mother looks harassed, fol-

lowing.” The staid tranquillity of Mrs. Ashwin’s face was so perfect that, before he could prevent himself, Lucas threw back his head and laughed.

“Miss Lennox,” said Violet, “the same that wants me to join her on Monday next, is a dear old friend of Mr. Warden’s, Mother dear: a friend of his youthful days. He says she kindled a flame he yet deplores, but I notice he says that of most people whose back histories I am not likely to know about. He must have been terribly — what’s the word? — inflammable.”

“I was,— and am,” said Lucas.

“He’s proud of it,” said Violet. “But I feel for the other side. It must be such nervous work kindling rather large men unexpectedly. Hateful, I should think,— if true. Now, I propose myself to tell you the tale ——”

“Right,” said Warden, “and I’ll interrupt you with impertinence. Off you go.”

“Well, I don’t know at all what Mr. Warden means by an atmosphere of warfare in the room, for they were perfectly sweet to us, both of them, considering we interrupted their morning’s work most terribly. Well, they were working, Mr. Warden, — yards of it. Untidy it might be called a little, but Miss Eccles rolled everything up before Miss Lennox had finished explaining they were not prepared for visitors. I entreated not to be visitors. I said, I only

knew how she must be feeling about this absurd delay, which will happen when people are traveling; and that the least I could do was to call and explain, — which was obvious. And then Mr. Warden remembered her suddenly, — I suppose he had been pondering which she was, — and they said sweet nothings about their early life. And in the interval I went to the window. And while I stood there, trying hard to remember a verse of Henley's, and astounded at the multiplicity of chimneys ingeniously fitted in to take up every inch of sky, and so prevent dressmakers earning the salaries they deserve —— ”

“ I seldom cavil at your style,” said Warden. “ But that sentence is too long.”

“ It's my strong feelings,” said Violet, slightly flushed. “ *Please* do not interrupt me. While I stood there drinking in the chimneys, — I heard Miss Eccles sniff.”

“ Sniff, or sigh ? ” enquired Claude. “ It's not the same.”

“ Sniff, Father dear. The sound that means the most compassionate kind of contempt, for circumstances or for people you can't help.”

“ What was the circumstance in this instance, — you ? ”

“ I could not be sure, of course. But it interested me *at once*. You see, till that moment I had only

thought Miss Eccles was the ordinary kind of person in black, with a waist," said Violet.

"*Had* you?" said Lucas Warden.

"Yes." She turned on him in a flash. "Because I am a woman. Mother will tell you the same thing. Everywhere we go, in shops and theatres and tea-places, waisted people in black go sliding about. Often when you look at them by chance they are lovely, and that was the case to-day. I simply had not thought of looking at her."

"I can give you a better reason for the neglect," said Warden. "She kept her back turned continuously."

"And who wonders?" said Violet warmly. "She feels me an abominable intruder, and suspects me of snatching at her well-earned gains. She *feels* I am an amateur — highly-skilled people always do, — and she knows Miss Lennox is unfairly prejudiced in my favour, by no virtue of mine, but because of Father's beautiful behaviour to her at the Gibbs's party." Eveleen's fine eyes turned in Claude's direction, and he feared an interruption; but Violet skimmed on.

"Ladies' pretensions in trade must necessarily seem to her ridiculous, and exasperation with Miss Lennox all this year must have been her daily bread. As for Mr. Warden," — she turned to that gentleman, and paused dramatically. "I forget," she

said innocently. "Does one read Dickens now, or does one not?"

"One does," said Dr. Ashwin.

"One does not," said Lucas Warden simultaneously.

"Thank you," said Violet. "Then I appeal to Father only. He will remember the incident about poor Kate Nickleby, and the ancient men who crawled into the shop to ogle her ——"

"Rather than the elegant ladies they escorted," Claude supplied.

"Just so, Father dear. You have such a comforting memory. Understand me," said Violet, stretching a hand, "it was Miss Eccles' startling beauty, and the thought of a thoroughly inferior mother in the background, that set me thinking of poor Kate. Not at all the *character* of her face, for Kate's features were ninnyish probably, for all their charm."

"Nor the striking resemblance of Miss Lennox to the Mantalini, I should imagine," said Claude.

"Nor that," agreed his daughter. "Oh dear me, I wish she was." She leant her chin on her palm and reflected sadly.

"That girl has the temper of a pole-cat," said Mr. Warden, taking his cigar out.

"Yes, poor dear," said Violet. "When her wonderful eyes dropped from me to my clothes, I was so relieved. I felt *they* were just worth looking at

possibly, and I did not mind *their* being burnt alive."

"Has she any style?" said Eveleen carelessly.

"Yes, Mother," said Violet, suddenly meek. "It's a pity you can't see some things she did for Margery Gibbs. When I lent her my blue Italian regimental coat to copy at home ——"

"You never were so frantic," said Eveleen, moved a little. "Is the person respectable?"

"Well," said Violet. "Her mother drinks a little, — but only on third or fourth-hand evidence."

"I hope you don't propose to get first-hand," said Mr. Warden.

"How you read my thoughts!" said Violet, turning on him again. "I wonder now, is there anything especially fascinating about the Brixton part of London?"

"Except that most of the music-hall population lives there,— nothing particular."

"Violet," said her father. "I warn you I shall draw the line."

"You are all interrupting me terribly," said Violet, sinking back with an expression of bitter reproach. "Mother is waiting for the end of a sentence I started *minutes* ago."

Eveleen lifted her eyebrows, and the gentlemen held their breath; for no one in their hearts doubted the leadership in this artlessly instituted controversy. Evidently the crisis impended now.

"*When* I lent Miss Eccles my blue Italian regimental coat, which is the apple of my eye, to copy at home," said Violet, "I asked her to be so kind as to bring it back in person, with some specimens of her work, for Mother's sake, enclosed in one of the art-green boxes which are part of Miss Lennox's stock-in-trade."

"The largest part," said Warden.

He received no encouragement from his host's daughter, only a withering glance. Remembering instructions received concerning the line to be adopted in this interview, he scratched his head and retracted. It was easy enough, with Eveleen, to retract: for she had not attended to the discussion, so aptly aimed at her, in great detail. Only one answer, indeed,—a mere assent from her daughter,—really stuck. Violet was a crazy Ashwin, but her instinct for the remote quality called style approached Eveleen's own. It was the one solitary point of contact of their characters. She clutched that floating straw of fact therefore, and stored it as likely to be serviceable.

As for the talking, she let it flow past her. She soon grew tired in debate, and could not tolerate reflection. If events fell, fortunately, one need not further disturb one's mind; if unfortunately, no amount of witty commentary really improved them. If Violet was inclined to meddle with "*rasant*"

affairs and uninteresting people, Eveleen was well enough pleased to shake her temporarily off, and trust her to the luck of the Ashwins to make her mark, and even reflect some credit on others at a later stage. Claude had often made such a plunge, under the cloud of her blank disapproval, and emerged again, amazingly for Eveleen, with everyone shaking him by the hand. He had probably encouraged the girl in this, and, during his wife's absence, got the affair in hand. She trusted so, for his sake and Violet's. The one thing she asked was that her daughter should not be drawn among dowdies. Common girls with intemperate mothers were as nothing, compared with the horror of that. Such persons could easily be disposed of later,—dowdies could not. Mrs. Ashwin, as Violet judged acutely, would not for worlds have had Miss Lennox upon her visiting-list. But here was Miss Lennox neatly introduced as Lucas Warden's early love,—and attached to a girl with style. It was a very happy combination, worthy of Violet's intelligence; and it had, by the usual slow degrees, the effect that Violet hoped and intended.

Quite late that night, when he least expected it, Eveleen concluded the girl's affair with Claude.

She began, so indirectly as to mislead him, on the subject of Warden, who had at last left the house,

having shown himself more entertaining than usual, — to the others, that is. Eveleen had been bored.

“I wish Violet would not fasten her eyes on people in that silly manner,” she observed. “Men like it even less than women.”

“I like it,” said Claude. “It’s a mark of attention.”

“It is not,” said Eveleen. “It’s a mark of inattention quite as often. Besides,” she added, “it’s perfectly possible to attend without.” Her own eyes, far from offending in the manner to which she alluded, were on her husband’s sleeve, where the slightest mark of chalk was visible. “I wish,” she said, with unusual liveliness, “if you must play low games, Claude, you would not go about looking like a billiard-marker.”

Dr. Ashwin snicked the chalk off absently. He had been graciously allowed his game, though rather late, and he felt the better for it. Billiards was one of his rare diversions, as it was also one of the half-dozen directions in which he was assured he might have made his fortune, had he wished.

“Better low games of skill than high ones of chance,” he suggested in his deliberate tone. “You ought really to be thankful my tastes are so innocuous.” Having waited for any comment in vain, he proceeded. “Warden is a bore, of course, but no harm in him. You had not wanted me to do any-

thing about anything, had you? Puss enjoys her perambulations." He looked at her anxiously rather. Some matters he really had to leave to her.

"It's silly," said Eveleen. "However, I suppose she will go on doing it. No, there's no harm." Claude was relieved. "We can't hire Warden to take her down there every morning, however," said Eveleen, examining her nails.

"To Battersea?" His mind leapt in front of hers. "Oh, that can be managed. You think she might do it, then?"

"She's not a baby," said Eveleen. "And if she must have fads and fancies, she had better get through with them. Later on, she'd only have them worse."

"Would she?" The doctor looked at her expectantly: thus stated, the case of Violet sounded more familiar than he had feared. "I think I can answer for her doing it thoroughly," he said, "if she does it at all. But — she's at the age for discoveries, you know. It will colour her." He spoke in jerks, still watching his wife in quick flashes,—glances that asked for help.

"I suppose it's a clean place," said Eveleen.

"I shan't suppose anything without seeing it," he answered brusquely. "The woman has some hygienic ideas, I made sure of that. As for exercise, I stipulated for her starting at ten. Then, if she

rides in the morning, as she proposes, and retires early, she'll do pretty well." He turned his back to his wife on the hearth, and paused. "One knows what the craving is for anything mechanical," he said. "Well-regulated. We ill-regulated people need it most of all. That part of it I followed easily, from the first. But the rest,—it's a flat business,—ugly. And once in the wood you can't escape. There was Margaret,—she lived wincing,—I should know. And she had Gibbs to fall back on, at the worst."

"You're making too much of it, I should say," remarked Eveleen.

"I hope so," he said fervently. "Perhaps." Another interval ensued, broken again by him. "That Eccles girl she mentioned," he said. "I asked Arthur Gibbs about her,—got all he knew. There's no harm there,—trouble, but no harm. She's a girl with a grievance against society,—not what you suppose." He had not seen Eveleen move her head,—could not possibly, indeed, since his back was turned. "Her father was an honest mechanic, and married a well-bred goose. Society can't prevent its happening, unfortunately. She ran away with her bicycle teacher,—it may often have occurred, for all I know. I daresay he never ceased regretting it, nor his daughter after him."

"Nor the wife, I should think," said Eveleen. She

had no objection to hearing stories, even told in such a snappy, disconnected fashion. "Turn round and talk properly, Claude," she said. "If you mean to talk."

He turned obedient to direction. Eveleen studied his figure with gratification. The bar the consideration of Violet caused was in his brow. He looked, as his daughter had looked at dinner, exaggeratedly miserable. But even to Eveleen's eye, which habitually overlooked the unusual in face and form, he was a "smart" man,—astonishingly young-looking for all his multifarious agitations.

"The wife's a tragi-comedy," he informed her. "Puss was right: it's not so far from the Nickleby situation. I have not gone into it very deeply, of course ——"

"Have you at all?" said Eveleen, passingly amazed. Claude's fragments of information, shot at her at all seasons, were so unaccountable.

"Oh, well,—Gibbs said drink, you know, and that's nasty. I thought you wouldn't stand that. Luckily, I learnt it had been a hospital case: so I investigated easily."

"Oh," said Eveleen, with vague disgust. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"Not if I promise you entertainment? It's unheard-of, for sheer oddity, in my experience. The

mother is a silly die-away woman, a poor curate's daughter, Gibbs heard,—one of twins in a large family —— ”

“ Goodness, Claude ! What can that matter ? ”

“ I thought it might help a little,— I own it's not the point. The point is that she does drink,— tea. She overdrinks it. Not but what it's dangerous,” he added swiftly. “ But perfectly refined, as a failing. That's the point.”

“ It seems to have amused you,” said Eveleen, after a pause.

“ Well, you see, I had been a little vexed in mind,” he apologised. “ Doesn't it strike you the girl — the daughter — must be something of a character ? The charge rests on her assertion.”

“ You mean she goes round saying her mother drinks ? ”

“ That's what I mean. She told her employer so, and the Rector's wife some years back: quarters, do you see, where it was bound to damage her,— she with her living to get. What she means by it, I should really like to know. Perhaps Violet will find out.”

“ I'm sure I hope she won't,” said Eveleen. She had ceased to be astonished at what the Ashwins found amusing. It may have been in the same category as their superannuated taste for Dickens. However, she made an effort of memory, just to be

up to him. "That's the girl Warden admired, is it?" she said. "The one he had known in youth."

"No — no, — no!" he said, with surprising vivacity. "Excuse me. You are confusing the two cases. The one Warden had known in youth was the plain and irreproachable Miss Lennox, who is hedged about on all sides with clerical relations."

"Oh, then I was wrong," said Eveleen. "Not that it matters."

"Not at all," said he, relapsing.

"I wonder you're so excited," she said. "I suppose it's that game."

He broke down and laughed. "If you had seen the game," he protested. "It really can't be that."

"Well then, you are fussing, as usual. What's the good?"

"No good. I fuss to no account. It's my despicable nature." He smiled at her, his pleasant youthful smile. "But I'll tell you one thing, Evie: the idea of Miss Kate attracts me."

"Kate?"

"Yes. Nickleby, you know. I'd give something to see Miss Eccles."

"Well, you won't if I can help it," said Eveleen: but she said it in the depths of her clear and quiet soul. "Come to bed, Claude," she said aloud, sweeping in her wandering skirts after an interval. "I'm tired anyhow, and you ought to be. Of course, I

know you can never stop talking — when you're relieved."

"Relieved?" he ejaculated, as she rose.

"Yes," said Eveleen, rolling out her lip with her slow smile, her back half turned to him. "You are so absurd. You go chattering by the yard together, you and Violet. What you ought to do is to thank me,— both of you,— for letting you off so easily."

III

THE TALE OF A WINK

LUCAS WARDEN was wrong.

Miss Lennox and Miss Eccies,— the young lady “in black with a waist,”— had not been quarrelling the day Miss Ashwin and her escort came upon them so suddenly; for Miss Lennox, the so-called proprietress of the business at Battersea, was, and had been for long, as wax in her forewoman’s hands.

Lennoxes, to use the term the staff applied to it invariably, consisted of a single long room on the upper floor of a respectable house, jammed between two shops in a crowded street of the suburb. It was a hot room in summer, facing south; but the departed Miss Moffat had chosen, and Miss Lennox adored it. It had a top-light, which is always an artistic asset, but which was of singularly little profit to the workwomen, since the light was shut out by an art green blind. The blind failed entirely, on the other hand, to shut out the heat, which in the dog-days was apt to be stifling.

Miss Lennox, living up to the top-light, had added a plain linoleum and tinted walls, with a blue vase

on the table, which Miss Eccles, who had connections in the gardening profession, kept daily supplied with flowers. The room was divided half-heartedly into two with a flimsy curtain, on the door-side of which the clients interviewed the principal, upon a limited piece of carpet. On the window-side the staff, consisting of Miss Eccles and a short girl called Sally Pepper, sat and sewed; in the company of one of those headless beauties, whose claim to admiration consists of a fair human semblance to the waist-line, and fashion in the abstract beneath it, in the form of a wire cage. On the mantelshelf, in headless, silent rivalry, stood a cast of the winged Victory, to cheer Miss Lennox's young woman with ideals of drapery. Miss Eccles, if her eye chanced to fall on it in the course of her vigorous and varied labours, could hardly ever avoid a sniff.

Alice Eccles had been taken in the original instance "for charity"; from which date, as may frequently happen with a young person of spirit in the circumstances, she never let Miss Lennox forget it, or failed to make her feel her resentment. Alice, transfixed in a lady-like studio at Battersea, was good, in her own opinion, for far better things. Nature had turned her out a healthy animal, tall, elastic, charged to the finger-tips with youthful magnetism and powerful grace. Nature, being in an indulgent mood, no doubt, when Miss Alice was

in the cradle, had added what was barely necessary for strictly trade purposes, a fine oval face, with straight features, straight brows, and a pair of brilliant long brown eyes. Alice, a bright girl, had supplemented Nature vigorously on her own account. Catching hints at intervals from her mother, who kept the relics of a delicate training, Alice had cultivated an accent and a manner,—a wonderful manner,—warranted to pulverise the ordinary West London buyer in a fashionable shop. On the strength of these attributes alone, she would have been taken “like a shot,”—so she assured Miss Lennox,—for a first-floor department, by any enterprising manager to whom she presented herself; and she was ready with lists of young ladies in high departmental positions, who could not be said, at least by Miss Eccles, to possess a quarter of her own advantages.

But fate was against Alice. She had been, as she confided to Violet towards the close of the second week, “wrecked on respectability.” She had spared Miss Lennox, who was what Alice called “twittery” about some things, an introduction to this striking phrase; but to her own mind it represented, as was evident, the summary of her whole career, from ten years’ old when she first took charge of her mother, to her present mature age of twenty.

“I’m made to work with men,” confided Alice. “Men take to me naturally, and I’d have stood no

nonsense from them, if I'd been let my way, and given my chance. But do you think, brought up as I've been, I'd be allowed to look one of 'em in the eyes? Oh, my dear!"

Violet was Alice's dear at quite an early stage of their intercourse, not so much from affection, as for effect. Violet, as Charles had found, was a perfectly charming listener; and Alice, who had grievances stored up and running over, could not long resist an ear offered from a girl of her own age. She stood on her dignity and sniffed at intervals through the first week or so of Violet's apprenticeship; and having thus had leisure to sum up all her mincing absurdities, with exaggeration, for the benefit of four or five young ladies who travelled daily with her in the tram from Brixton, she relented suddenly: turning right-about-face in the course of a single morning, in a manner of which only such a powerfully cock-sure young person could have been capable.

This singular revolution began in an almost involuntary fashion, by a wink: a wink while Miss Lennox, in the further part of the room, was interviewing a customer. This wink arose from what might be called subjective emotion, and might have been directed anywhere; only, granted Violet's presence within three feet of Miss Eccles, and demurely sewing, it was more natural to wink at her than at Sally Pepper, or the furniture. Miss Ashwin

replied with a glance, not visibly humorous, more of a kind of din, far-reaching despair, and combined with a pretty slight movement of the shoulders. But the understanding thus instituted could not be entirely ignored in their subsequent relations. The frozen surface shivered, so to speak: and ere long the pent-up flood of Alice's confidence was smashing the remaining icicles in all directions.

Violet, with beautiful tact, remained demure. She would not assume, merely because Alice ceased sniffing and talked to her, that she was loved by Alice. Indeed it was only too obvious that, on many counts, Miss Eccles still despised her heartily. So Violet, feeling despicable, naturally, in the wilderness of her ignorance of "bindings," braids and "bias," and of the petty meannesses of customers in the matter of remnants, preserved the forms with practised social knowledge, keeping a guiding hand, for all Miss Eccles' plunging, on their intercourse unseen.

Violet was "my dear" three times during the morning of the wink; and Miss Lennox, overhearing the appellation, was rather shocked. Miss Lennox was a working-woman, and, in theory, a leveller; but it did not seem right or natural to her that poor Alice Eccles should patronise Miss Ashwin. Alice, for all her managing instincts, and the untameable brilliance of her presence, remained "poor

Alice" to Miss Lennox, by virtue of her circumstances.

Miss Lennox was one of those astonishing women who seem absolutely blind to physical glory, in whatever form. It was not that she had Puritan objections to thinking of such things, it was simply that she did not see them. When Mr. Gibbs had called Alice in her presence pretty, which was quite the mildest term society, even clerical, could have applied to her, Miss Lennox had been surprised. She was a nice, bright, healthy sort of girl, of course, and Miss Lennox saw all her character very clearly, penetrating promptly, as Mr. Gibbs should have done, to the Alice within. She saw her wisely, in short,—not well.

That character, as she had earnestly assured Mr. Gibbs and Dr. Ashwin, included some excellent qualities. Poor Alice was admirably honest, for instance, almost invariably cheerful, and,—if her way of speaking of her mother was peculiar at times,—a tolerant and loyal daughter. Yet more important in Miss Lennox's eyes, she seemed to understand propriety, had crowds of girl acquaintance, of whom she chattered very amusingly,—and never spoke of gentlemen at all. Miss Lennox could not, of course, tell of what she was thinking, during the long periods of silence in the workroom, while Alice snatched at the cotton, and sniffed occasionally. One

does not (if one is Miss Lennox) follow, or want to follow, all a young girl's thoughts. It was the rarest thing, naturally, for a gentleman to come into the workroom; but the day Mr. Lucas Warden had walked in with Violet, Alice's behaviour, in her principal's eyes, had been singularly perfect. In fact, Miss Lennox had not been aware of her in the room at all, during the interview with her old acquaintance; and Mr. Lucas Warden had been equally oblivious of her presence, as was right.

Miss Lennox watched the two girls in her charge, of course, like a faithful hen; and except during the process of shuffling consequent upon lunch and tea intervals,—for it was against her conscience ever to leave the workroom empty, in case customers might call,—she was always in their society. A dear friend of Miss Lennox's, who was also an earnest woman, kept a small lunch-and-tea shop but a few steps from her door. The few steps were across a crowded noisy street; but Miss Lennox was accustomed to the idea of Miss Eccles making those few steps in safety. So she let Miss Eccles go alone, and subsequently escorted Violet.

Violet had been introduced to the earnest lady of the tea-shop, and her plain daughter, and had thought everything on the premises "quite delicious," with an emphasis that delighted both. Indeed, all Miss Lennox's "nice arrangements" had been

thoroughly appreciated by Violet, and were, the head of the firm had reason to think, reassuring the home circle rapidly. Miss Lennox wrote to Mrs. Gibbs, proclaiming Miss Ashwin a sweet girl, and *really* so simple. Confidence, during work-time "intervals" flowed between the pair; and many of Miss Lennox's private sufferings, excellent impulses, and unnecessary abnegations, became transparent to Violet during the hour while tea cheered and liberty united them.

But, on the day of the wink, the fine social equilibrium preserved in this trio of ladies changed. Till then, Violet had been Miss Lennox's young friend, and Alice their attribute. From the moment that notable signal was exchanged, Violet became Alice's confederate, and Miss Lennox their well-meaning patroness. Who shall say, amid the war of classes, and the tussle of age and youth, how these things occur?

It was a mere chance, of course, that at lunch-time,—much the longer interval of the two, while Alice was putting on her hat, a tooth of Alice's, which was in an interesting condition to which she had alluded at intervals that morning, should "stab" her suddenly, causing momentary, but evidently exquisite, pain.

"Poor girl!" said Miss Lennox, much fussed. "What ought we to do?"

“You ought to have it out,” said Violet quietly, in the character of the doctor’s daughter. “Let me see.”

Alice displayed a very white tooth, near the front, complacently. “Wouldn’t have it out for worlds,” she said. “Not me. Spoil my beauty for life. I’ll tell you what I’ll do,— drop into the chemist opposite and get him to advise me something.” The eyelid of her left eye sank very slightly, as Miss Ashwin fixed her with a grave regard. Miss Lennox, fussing still more, said she would go with Alice. She made elaborate and impracticable plans and combinations, at great length.

“No, I will go,” said Violet, soothing but definite, “because I know what to ask for exactly. It’s rather a new thing, Miss Lennox, and it must be put on at once. Would you terribly mind lunching alone just for to-day?”

Miss Lennox did mind, though not terribly; but she saw no better way. Two girls can consult a chemist with propriety; and when she feebly suggested going to seek the new remedy herself, Violet produced a name for it so long and latinised that Miss Lennox’s memory was unequal to retaining it. It seemed, in fact, most simple for the girls to go out in company: and Violet and Alice went.

“You rose to that,” said Miss Eccles with approval on the stairs, “as smooth as sneezing.” This

was one of Alice's home-grown phrases, and implied a natural or impulsive-seeming action, to which she was addicted, and which in others she admired. "My tooth's feeling better now, my dear," she proceeded as they attained the street, "so, if it's all the same to you, we'll cross straight over to Casselses."

Cassilis was the name of Miss Lennox's earnest friend; but as no girl can be expected to add another sibilant to such a word, Alice had telescoped the title. They crossed straight over, as proposed, Alice taking Violet's arm protectingly.

As soon as seated, in the elegant privacy of Casselses' upper room, they began at once to talk of their employer. That was, so to speak, in the bond.

"What's Loyce?" said Alice. "I never heard of it."

"Loïs, it is called," said Violet. "I believe it comes in the Bible."

"It doesn't then," said Alice. "I ought to know my Bible, if anyone ever did. Mum is always dropping bits of it. She's a dab at Bible-reading, I can tell you. We've texts in every room at home."

"Well, I will ask Father," said Violet. "But I believe it is somewhere in an epistle; and that's where Scotch people go to find their babies' names."

"Loyce was never a baby more than at present," said Alice. "Not according to me."

"She *is* a dear, isn't she?" said Violet. "But don't call her that upstairs, or I shall laugh."

"Is your father a preacher?" said Alice. "I shouldn't have thought it, to look at you."

"Oh no,—Father's a doctor. What on earth made you think that? I see," she added quickly, "the Bible name. But Father knows everything,—it's simply a weakness of his. He is always trying to conceal it."

"*You* know a few things, I shouldn't wonder," said Alice. "You've been at several finishing schools, haven't you now?" She sniffed, though mildly, as she picked up a radish by the leaves, and bit it with every appearance of health in the teeth that attacked.

Violet gravely shook her head. "I am afraid," she said, "I never even *wanted* to go to school. It's rather awful, Miss Eccles, but I feel I should so have disliked the other girls."

"You do hate 'em," said Alice reflectively, "until you learn to work them to your purposes. They're ready enough to admire, I'll say that for them; but unless you give them a sharp lead, they'll run and admire the wrong people. The sights I've seen set up as graven images,—you never did."

It was true Violet had never done; she looked at Alice yearningly.

"But men," she said, "are not the same."

"No, men are different. I give you that," said Alice graciously. Slowly, very slowly, in the seconds that ensued, she smiled upon Violet. "Oh, men!" she said. "I can't help it, my dear,—they do beat all."

From that point her real confidence started. Violet had found the key on sight, as it were, to all the things Miss Lennox was least likely ever to know. Violet herself did not get them all at once, of course; that between any pair of girls would be impossible; but she started by instinct on the right lines, giving Alice's good sense and good faith, as well as her superb attractions, their due. With that appearance, she must know life; and she was naturally to be the talker, while Miss Ashwin was content to comment and enquire. Just because it was the last attitude Alice expected on her part, she fell a victim to the guile more easily.

All the autobiography of which we proceed to give extracts was not, of course, collected the first day; only, since it is impossible to follow girls' divagations in dialogue, it shall be collected for the student of Miss Eccles at this point.

Born with a love of adventure, Alice had had, as she declared cheerfully, "no luck." Everything was against her, her birth most of all; for there is no stickler for the conventions like the weak woman

who has committed herself by a social imprudence, and been left clinging, as it were, to the brink. "Thou shalt not," had been multiplied exceedingly, for the bicycle-maker's daughter.

"I never had a scrap of fun," said Alice, "except at school. If I'd had a brother now,—but no such luck. My brother died a baby: at that point, Mother lost her health and got religion rather badly,—and simultaneously, Father struck. Men can strike, you may have noticed, Miss Ashwin, when they have had enough of muddling,—women can't. I was left to make the best of Mother and the texts. She reproached everyone with that baby's death, except herself: but I could never see how it could have been Dad's fault, anyhow. But everything always was his fault, since his original sin in marrying her. Mum was the romantic kind, if you understand; never believed awkward things till they were forced down her throat. She said he had loved her,—well, so he had, of course. But I could have told her he would not stand her grizzling for ever,—but then, I know what men are by nature, better than she does. It must be by nature," said Miss Eccles, "because she never let me get experience of my own. And her experience, which she's never tired of giving me, is that you marry the first man you mash, or who mashes you, and toddle into a life as pretty as a musical comedy. Well, you don't. I wonder,"

said Alice grimly, "what would have happened to her, if I had followed out that plan? She carried out the first part all right, but both of us together couldn't bring off the second. The music was wanting,—Mum changed a bit,—and Father, as was natural, changed too. He was a jolly man, Father, a thorough good sort. Good at his trade too,—sold capital stuff. At home he was sulky. I could have managed him if she'd let me; but she said he was growing coarse, and tried to keep him from me. I lost my temper at last, and gave up interfering between them. Whereupon Dad walked off for good, and was killed in a motor smash soon after. That was bad luck for me too ——"

"Bad luck?" gasped Violet, paling.

"Well, you know what I mean. No, you don't," Alice corrected sharply, "because you're fond of your father, and I shouldn't have said it. You needn't faint anyhow, Miss Ashwin, it's not worth it. What I mean is, I had just begun to get control of Mother before it happened, but as a widow she recovered all her glory."

"Glory?" said Violet, at sea. Alice nodded.

"Mother's sort is like that: nothing really sets them up in life like a widow's veil. I can't explain it, because personally I'd sooner have the man: but that's my vulgarity." Alice stopped and looked at her *vis-à-vis*.

"Yes?" said Violet.

"Well,— isn't it?"

"It may be. I agree with you. Memories alone, to live with, are rather selfish things."

"They are," said Miss Eccles, and sighed. "One would have thought you'd lived with Mother, saying that. She doesn't think much of other people." The girl frowned a minute. "I'm not sentimental a scrap," she said, "but I'd like to live a bit in my way. Though my way isn't hers, by chalks."

"Mothers are strange things," said Violet pensively. "Interesting. I should like to meet Mrs. Eccles."

"As a kind of society proper-thing-to-say," said Alice. She turned a gleam on Violet. "But you wouldn't, you know,— Mother drinks."

There was a pause. Violet's brow knit painfully, and the faintest flush appeared. Then she lifted her eyes to Alice.

"How sad," she said. "Can't you stop her?"

"No, nor want to," said Alice. "She's *that* disagreeable when I do."

"I think," said Violet gravely, "that you are a frightfully satirical person, Miss Eccles. I hardly know if you're sincere."

"Don't you, my pretty pet," said Alice playfully. "Well, so long as I do, I can't see it matters. Now, listen here, and I'll tell you. I always tell people

this at first go off, just to see how it strikes them, and prove all their nice instincts. Mother drinks more than she ought to. She's absolutely dependent on it, and gets cunning and silly when she's prevented. All that's a fact. Doctor's forbidden her to exceed a certain quantity, or she'll pay for it. That's a fact, too. She pays money out for the stuff, — my money, — but if she goes on she'll pay something more than that, — you understand? She's been in hospital once. And she goes on in spite, — she's mad on it, lost all conscience and command. She says she'd sooner die than stop. There! Ever come across that situation, in your set?"

"Not exactly. Not with drinking, I mean," said Miss Ashwin thoughtfully. "With smoking of course I have. Some women I know ——"

"Women?" Alice was momentarily aghast. Evidently, that form of vice was unknown at Brixton, and for an appreciable instant the tables were turned. Then she snatched the lead again. "Well, that's my Mother," she said. "Never mind the other people. Nice look-out for me, don't you think, with that tied on to me?"

"It does seem hard on you," said Violet.

"She's a nice woman, you know," said Alice swiftly. "A thorough lady; stayed with a Bishop once. There's nothing else against her, anywhere.

She won't mix with the neighbours, but what do you expect? She never let me accept an invitation in the neighbourhood. She only lives there because it is Father's house, and she'd never be able to let it. She knows no one but the clergyman, who's got no family. It was through him I got this job, and a precious fuss there was about my taking it, I promise you! I was ashamed, the trouble she gave him and Mr. Gibbs about it — Mr. Gibbs had this parish then. I suppose you'd have heard all that. Mr. Gibbs answered to Mum for Loyce's character and habits —— ”

Miss Eccles concluded by a slight but perfectly eloquent contortion of her features.

“ It's delightful your knowing Uncle Arthur,” said Violet. “ I had forgotten that. Did you know Aunt Margaret too? ”

“ Mum did. I never saw her to remember. I remember your uncle though,— he seemed sensible enough.”

“ Didn't my aunt? ”

“ I can't say. Mum seemed to think her skittish — I mean for a parson's wife. Mum disapproved of her — what are you laughing at, Miss Ashwin? I hope Mum told them truth about me,— but of course I couldn't be sure.” She looked enquiring.

“ You want to know what he said about you? ”

Let me think," said Violet. "He chiefly remembered you were pretty, of course; but I think he was a little bit anxious for Miss Lennox."

Alice smiled. "For the china?" she enquired sarcastically. "I remember now, I was in a temper the day he came to call. I take you to witness, Miss Ashwin, I've broken nothing in the workroom yet. Those are the same ornaments we've had since I came. The angel on the mantelpiece is broken already, but that's not my fault,—she was born so. By the way, what's the sense of that, do you happen to know?"

"The angel?" Violet's forehead lifted. "Oh, you mean the Nikē of Samothrace. Don't you think she's rather beautiful?"

"She might be," said Alice. "On the other hand, she might not. It leaves you doubtful, not having the head." There was a pause, and the course of the dialogue hung uncertain for a minute or so; then, since Miss Ashwin refused to lead, Alice had to start fresh,—on a slightly lower plane, perhaps. But Miss Eccles, for all her high-handedness, was only twenty.

She tilted her head a little to the side, folded her hands, and said,—“So your uncle thought me pretty, did he?”

“He used stronger expressions, when pressed,” said Violet. “And I naturally pressed him.”

Alice looked down at her hands, exhibiting a fine array of eyelashes as she did so. "I take after my father," she explained. "It's not my fault, and I don't see why it should be thrown up at me continually. No one entering on life could look at Mum and Dad and have a minute's doubt which was the line to follow in looks. Dad's was a handsome stock: the cousins I used to go to see in Devonshire were the same. Farmers they were,—once I stayed there a month, and came back as fat—Mum was ashamed of me. She would never let me go again, though they were kind—my word!" A pause. "I do love the country," said Alice.

"I knew that already," said Violet. "I knew when I watched you arranging those roses yesterday in Miss Lennox's blue bowl."

Miss Eccles looked at her, a wavering look. It meant, more to come when confidence should be ripe. "Yes," she said. "Well, what was I saying? I chose to take after the Eccles side, and Mum's never quite forgiven me. I've done everything she told me to, kept myself low, minced my walking, flattened my hair. I can talk uppishly, can't I, now? You heard me at Mrs. Fellowes to-day. I've worn weeds as long as Mum did, like any blessed widow; but it couldn't be supposed at sixteen I'd look like one, could it? Father died in my sixteenth year. What would you feel like, Miss Ashwin, wearing rusty

black, when a bit of yellow was your private taste?"

"You would look lovely in yellow," said Violet. "Primrose yellow: and so very few people really can."

"I look well in black, if it comes to that," said Alice, sniffing. "But it's not Mum's fault if I don't look like a walking slop-shop. That's what would satisfy her. She and Loyce would agree nicely,—Nikky on the mantelpiece is their line. Mum lives herself in a dressing-gown,—ways I hate. . . . Well, what *was* I saying, my dear, before we touched on this?"

IV

WOMEN AND FOREWOMEN

AND about here it may be mentioned, once for all, in order not utterly to revolt our more serious readers, that these two young persons "touched on" clothes in their converse not infrequently. One has met other girls of eighteen to twenty who did the same; and with one of these two at least it was a professional interest.

Alice was an artist born. Since the days when she snipped stuff to fit her dolls, her true vocation had summoned her. Her artist's eye unclothed the human model, judged and refitted them with the colours and draperies their "points" demanded. She acted unconsciously and on inspiration in the matter, and like all true artists, who have not the critic's gift to explain the intangible canons of taste, she was desperately impatient with those who failed to see as she did instantly.

Miss Lennox,—Loyce, as she continued mischievously to call her,—had caused Alice, as she had caused Violet, genuine pain; for Alice had an affection for Miss Lennox at the root, though she

refused to recognise the presence of gratitude among its ingredients. It was Alice, "between ourselves, my dear," who had made the reputation of Lennoxes; and it was "Loyce" who was constantly betraying their common undertaking by her inappropriate appearance, and unskilful advice to customers. Countless times, according to Miss Eccles, she had stepped in at a critical moment, averted incredible colour-schemes which the customers ordained, and to which Miss Lennox smilingly agreed, proposed the possible compromise, and reached it by skilful flattery; or, at the worst, lent such distinction by her own clean cutting and smart workmanship to an ungrateful and ugly order, that Lennoxes need not blush in sending it out.

"I've done everything for her," said Alice of Loyce, on the day of the wink, when they sat together lunching at Casselses, "and what, after all, has she done for me? Paid me the skimpy half of what I should be getting in a good shop. Driven me wild and spoilt my temper with her twittering and second thoughts where there's only one thought possible, and that's different from hers. Wheedled me back against my conscience when I'd given notice: pretended I'd not insulted her when I had. Given me green walls and the lower half of a Greek statue to look at, to raise my tone. Kept me a lady,—hasn't she? Why, at this minute she's twittering at the

idea of our hobnobbing for half an hour, and wondering what your uncle would say about it. Don't I know! Fine lot of lady about me, anyway,—ask anyone who really knows. Or, if you don't want the trouble,—look in that glass over there at me and you."

"I had rather look at you," said Violet quietly. "I had rather not see myself beside you, if it's all pretty as a musical comedy. Well,—you don't. I the same to you, Miss Eccles. I am facing the light, which is never becoming, and the tip of one's nose is hardly dependable in this heat. . . . Instead, I want most terribly,—I simply ache to set you right about some things, and give you a bit of my mind on certain subjects. Only, I am afraid if I do, you will return to your original Arctic altitude."

"My what?" said Alice.

"Your high horse. What I may call the Mrs. Fellowes manner, which reduces me to dust."

"Come off," said Alice, smiling. "You don't get at me that way. What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't think I was a Terror, would you?" said Violet, still in the softest tone. "But then I so seldom say all I think. I am naturally conceited and imperious and impertinent, with a rather vicious temper ——"

"Come off," Alice murmured again, her smile fading.

"A rather vicious temper well under control. No one ever saw me out of temper, I may tell you in confidence ——"

"So I should suppose," said Alice.

"So I shall spare you the exhibition for the present. But if you ever suggest again that Miss Lennox, or the Gibbises, or anyone but myself have any right to choose the friends I make, I shall probably surprise you. You know what independence is, Miss Eccles, naturally. But you don't know what *newly-acquired* independence is, and the tremendous advantage it gives you, owing to suppressed excitement, all the time. Have I looked excited, this last week?"

"As prim as a pussy-cat," said Miss Eccles.

"No harm in me?"

"Not an ounce. Fine-missyish a trifle, looking down on the rest of us."

Miss Ashwin smiled at Alice. "I *am* a little discontented," she said in confidence. "That's the truth. I am afraid I am ambitious, Miss Eccles."

"*What?*" Alice's look of amusement vanished completely. "Not for the business, you don't mean?"

"For the business, yes. It has the elements of prosperity, hasn't it? But I have an uncomfortable feeling,—I may be wrong,—of advantages being frittered away."

“Twittered,” Alice improved it. “Look here,—are you in earnest?”

Miss Eccles’ appearance had completely changed from her former easy humour. She was another person, cautiously measuring the girl who faced her.

“I am a perfect idiot at figures,” said Violet plaintively, resting her head on her hand, “with a thoroughly untidy mind. I have no natural capacity for business at all; but to judge by Father’s marked success in acquiring one, at a comparatively advanced age, I do not despair of myself. At least, I am observant; and living all day in that place, one can’t help noticing things.” A pause. “Why, for instance, have we only the one room? — Mother’s dressmaker, not a rich woman, and close-fisted like the French, has all the floor. And rents are higher at Knightsbridge, probably.”

“I should think so,” Alice jerked.

“Miss Lennox,” proceeded Violet, “to my real surprise, has quite as large a clientèle ——”

“Don’t use foreign words,” said Alice, primming her lips, “it reminds me of the deficiencies of my education.”

“It *is* a silly habit,” said Violet bitterly, “when our language is one of the richest in the world. Miss Lennox has quite as many regular customers, is what I mean.”

“I knew you did, dear,” said Alice. “Go on.”

“The room opposite ours, with a nice paper, and some illustrated fashion-sheets about — not to mention original designs in pencil with a personal note — would improve our position at once. People do so like a quiet corner to discuss their ideas with somebody, don’t they?”

“So they do,” said Alice. “The drawback is, somebody — if it’s Loyce — always wants, sooner or later, to refer to me.”

“Naturally,” said Violet. “But need it be the drawback? I don’t believe poor Miss Lennox enjoys it really. Think of her agitation this morning, for instance,—when you attracted my attention. It was pitiful.” She drooped a moment, holding the edge of the lunch-table with her slight, clever hands. Miss Eccles was considering too.

“I never tried to cross her about that,” she said, “because rights are rights, according to me: and those that hold the capital keep the direction. See? Not to mention she doesn’t really trust my manners, with the silly ones. She thinks I should bully and offend them, and she’s right. Indeed, I have offended one or two.”

“I know,” said Violet. “You can’t suffer fools gladly, and no more, really, can I. But I can act, and pretend to, at need. And anyhow, it’s an excellent thing to practice patience.”

“I shall believe your father is a preacher soon,” said Alice.

“ Oh, excuse me,— I am talking at myself. I was thinking of myself entirely. You see, in Mother’s society, you meet quantities of silly women, and learn how to dodge them in conversation, and how to manage them too. And as to trusting me, Miss Eccles, I may mention without boasting that Miss Lennox has been growing fonder of me all this week. She very nearly loves me now.”

Alice paused, staring at Violet. She took her time.

“ Well,” she said presently, “ you are a nice little cat, and no mistake. That’s what you’re after, isn’t it? You want to capture the interviews, as you call them — get them out of her hands. . . . Not but what she’d be thankful. But perhaps I had better mention,— *I* am called the forewoman, Miss Ashwin.”

“ Oh dear,” said Violet, pained. “ And what does that mean exactly,— I never know.”

“ I suppose it means,— being English,— that I’m to the fore. Which means, in front of you. . . . Don’t imagine I’m objecting,” she proceeded at leisure, as Violet seemed utterly prostrated. “ I’ve no natural turn for palavering, I’m quicker at seeing and handling things. I know my own points, thank you, without your telling me. And I’ve a notion we could work together, come to that; because I like your style, generally speaking. I mean, of course, if you’ll avoid being too cattishly clever, which puts me out.”

"I simply can't help it," said Violet, looking desperate. "You must put up with me, Miss Eccles, as I am. I mean, if we are to keep together at all. I can only hope I've shown you the worst of me in this interview. I have tried — but I hardly know."

"The worst of you?" said Alice, with a laugh. "Oh well, that's all right, then,— we shall get along. Don't look like crying, for mercy's sake, or Casselses will be on us, asking what's up, and reporting me to Lennoxes for maltreating the apprentices. Blest if I'm not adopting your style in talk, Miss Ashwin. I'm sure I hope you'll excuse me," added Alice, with propriety, glancing round her.

"I'm so worried about Miss Lennox, to tell the truth," said Violet, lowering her tone, for Mrs. Cassilis, the proprietress, was passing. "She looks so tired."

"She's never got over Miss Moffat's behaviour in the spring. Talk of terrors, she was one. Good gracious!"

"We will not go into that," said Violet, lifting a hand. "Miss Lennox has told me all about it,— and more than she thinks. If there's one phenomenon in the world that outrages me, Miss Eccles, it is a good, kind woman taking up with a mean, merciless Trampler, and giving her the name of friend."

"You do palaver well," admitted Alice. "I'll say that for you. That's Miss Moffat to the life."

"I am serious," said Violet. "I do wish dear Miss Lennox would go right away,—don't you? For a time, I mean, of course: to the sea or somewhere. I think I shall talk a little to Mrs. Cassilis about that. She has an influence with Miss Lennox, — hasn't she?"

"Anyone has an influence with Loyce," said Alice. She bit her lip; then she lifted her eyes to the clock. "Miss Ashwin," she said, "look here: you have got all sorts of scheming notions in your little noddle, and I've simply not time to worry them out. They may be worth worrying, or they may not. But I'll tell you one thing, straight. I shall leave this place in two minutes, with your company or without."

"Is it *really* time?" cried Violet, swerving to the clock. "It does seem so short."

"It's my time," said Alice. "You and Miss Lennox, when you go out together, take longer."

"Oh," the girl cried, "it's not true!"

"True? Do you think Sally and I don't time you? But I tell her, she needn't be surprised. You're not brought up to regular habits like her and me."

"I am annihilated," said Violet. "Ironed out. And talking of natural cunning, Miss Eccles, I'm very much afraid you've been saving that up."

Alice admitted the charge with a cheerful smile.

It was not till the pair were in the street that she said brusquely — “The park is just down that way. You go down there for half an hour and see the flowers. I’ll explain to Loyce so she won’t bother about you.”

Miss Ashwin crossed the street, in two sections, at her side before she answered. “Are you speaking as forewoman,” she then enquired, “or as friend?”

“Whichever you like. I don’t mind ordering you, if you prefer it.”

“Then I am not offended,” said Violet, “but I shan’t obey. When shall I next talk to you?”

“Goodness knows. Loyce will never repeat this process,” said Alice sagely.

“Mayn’t I drive you part of the way this evening? It’s the small car, but Joliffe’s bringing it, and he’s discreet.”

“No, you don’t,” said Alice. “Likely I’d be seen with you, isn’t?”

“You *do* need talking to.” Violet turned to gaze at her, large-eyed. “Do you never accept lifts in life from anybody? Or is it that your people would think us fast?”

“I shall slap you in a minute,” said Alice. “Don’t provoke me, I advise you.”

“I am thinking,” said Violet desperately. “May I come and see you some time at Brixton, or is that equally out of the question?”

"All right," said Alice after consideration. "If you come without the car."

"Is it Joliffe you're afraid of?" asked Violet. "He's a married man, with a baby. Perhaps that makes no difference. Oh dear, what nice teeth you have when you smile. By the way, here's the chemist close at hand, we're passing him. . . . Would Sunday week do, I wonder? This one we're on the river, with the Marquis."

"The what?" Alice cried.

"A friend of Mother's,—French. I think there's nothing the Sunday after. I hope not. If there is, I'll let you know."

"Let me know in any case," said Miss Eccles briefly. "I'd sooner know for certain if you're coming, and when."

"Of course," said Miss Ashwin hastily. "Yes, I'll telegraph."

"Better send a halfpenny card," said Alice. "Telegrams frighten Mother."

Violet submitted again. As they turned into the entrance of Lennoxes' building, she was asking herself if she would ever get used to snubs. She was not used to them, and they caused a disproportionately painful shock to her system. Miss Eccles seemed to cast these shattering missiles round her so lightly, too. Violet hardly wondered poor Miss Lennox shrank at times.

V

A DISCOVERY

“I KNOW all about Miss Eccles now,” wrote Violet some weeks later to Margery Gibbs, “and she’s Thrilling. I dare tell you no more than that, since I hear Charles reads these letters, lest he fall in love with her simply on description. I have to go carefully, of course; but I think some time she is going to let me know her quite well. She is a perfectly wonderful girl,—she even impresses Mother.

“On Sunday last she brought my coat back,—the one made of Italian military cloth Father broke the law for in Italy. I was delighted to see it again, especially as I wanted it for the river, and Father was fussing about shawls. Don’t you loathe shawls, Margery darling? M. de Fervolles recognised the cloth at once, would you believe it, and said the idea of making war under other colours was charming, and wouldn’t I try the French uniform instead? Dear man, it was almost the only time he noticed me, but his little scenes of suppressed emotion with Mother were wonderful to watch, and his asides with Father almost too complicated for common use.

Mother did not trouble about them; but I had simply to rack my brains to follow the *sous-entendu* of their conversations, and longed to ask for Notes. What with that, and the sun dazzling us all day, I have seldom returned from a river-party so exhausted. I prefer Charles' sort, tell him, a Thousand times."

After this short summary of the expedition, which rang faintly with Violet's accustomed desolation to the sympathetic ear, she returned with evident delight to Miss Eccles, her own discovery and introduction. There was something healthy, girlish and eager in her manner of dealing with this new friend, that Charles found, for once, a trifle commonplace; and he skipped the interview of Alice and Mrs. Ashwin, which had evidently amused Violet. Charles did not care for comedy, lacking the tragic touch. The wit of the grave-diggers appealed to him, nothing Pickwickian or burlesque. His stepfather, however, was different. Mr. Gibbs never forgot one lamb of his scattered flock, and he was evidently struck by this unexpected light on Alice. This, together with his ever-fresh relish for the fair Eveleen's proceedings, lent interest for him to the portion Charles avoided.

"You see," explained Violet. "Mother is living without her maid, and words cannot say what that means to the rest of us. I had personally never any idea what Léontine is to us all, or the formidable

gap that pleurisy in such a person would leave in a household. It is evident Mother misses her more than she could, in any circumstances, miss me; though I do my best in little things, such as Buttoning, to replace her. If All is Lost, darling, I can still take a post as ladies' maid; but of course I am nothing, in natural Power, compared with Miss Eccles.

"The day she arrived with my coat in the nick of time, Mother was preparing to be several minutes too late for the train we had promised at Paddington, and was simply splendidly furious with everybody,—the kind of White anger I adore. Father and I were ready hours before, of course, and consoling one another in the hall. Father was just observing that at the worst he could make some extraordinary combination or other with the car, when Miss Eccles walked into the hall from the servant's corridor, and laid my coat down on a chair. Father, quite overcome by the splendid apparition, stopped his combining manœuvres and got up. So I introduced them, and apologised for Mother, explaining our desperate plight.

"'Could I be of any assistance, Miss Ahswin, I wonder?' says Alice, in what I call her customer-y manner,—unequalled on any Stage. Father said she was too obliging, but he feared only Heaven or a change of time-table could help us now. Miss Eccles

did not sniff precisely, but she put him in his place; and in two minutes, following orders as usual, I was showing her to Mother's room.

"I wish I knew, dear Margery, in what the quality of Greatness consists. Personally, I can only recognise and bow to it. Mother has moments of it certainly,—her state that morning was of spurning earthly things. Everybody had done their best to please her, and everybody had failed. The extra girl, reduced to remnants, was crying. Mother and Miss Eccles took one another's measure on sight—it was a sort of Field of the Cloth of Gold. I was quite too dazed to see how Miss Eccles did it,—all I know is, Mother was finished in time, and, owing to Father's usual luck in killing nobody in the Marylebone Road, we caught the train for Goring we had promised.

"I have not ventured yet to get Mother's opinion of Miss Eccles,—she may be raging under unaccustomed snubs for all I know; but Miss Eccles evidently thinks the better of me for being so closely related to Mother. I had to tell her every detail about the picnic party,—she says she knows Goring well. It is a relief to me when she deigns to meet me on any common ground—or water. Generally she despises our doings utterly, and seems to be marvelling silently that we don't know better how to amuse ourselves. Yet her ideas must be largely

visionary, for beautiful as she is, she has never had a chance of fun. I do so long to bring her down to Glasswell for a nice long day; she has a passion that is pathetic for country things, and a real respect for flowers that would be a bond with your Father, I am sure. Yet at present I simply dare not propose it, though I hope to be on terms to attempt it in time."

"Ex-traordinary," was Mr. Gibbs' comment, "but I might have known."

"I suppose it's the attraction of opposites," said Margery dubiously. "I can't say I quite like it, Papa."

"I can't bear it," said Charles, with manly dignity.

"Girls at school," said Mrs. Gibbs, "get enthusiasms for one another. I have known several who carried it too far. Violet never was at school, so I suppose she never worked off that phase, and is going through it now."

"That is tenable," said the Rector. "But why not a real friendship,—a staying thing? That would be a godsend to the girl." He looked from face to face of the table at which he sat.

"Because it is impossible," said Charles.

Mr. Gibbs' eyes rested on him, and he asked, "Are you jealous, Charles?"

"No, governor," said Charles. "But I have what Mark Twain calls an invincible antipathy to the

name. Eccles! Speckles,—freckles,—I ask you, children!”

His stepfather laughed. “There’s a lack of nobility about it possibly,” he admitted.

“It can’t,” argued Charles, “be written anywhere near to Ashwin in the stars. If they have come across one another, it can only be a chance con — Margery, what’s the word I want?”

“Conjunction,” said Margery.

“I thank you,” said Charles. “Conjugation came more naturally to my mind. I have rather forgotten my astrology,—a pity to let one’s early studies slide. Give me the sugar, Maud, and change the subject.”

Charles was jealous, nevertheless: and the arrival of Violet’s next letter did not improve matters in any degree. It was directed to him, and marked “private” with three dashes conspicuously, which would at ordinary times have consoled him for much that it contained; but having read it to its last corner, seeking for any phrase that was personally flattering to him, he felt more injured than ever. What on earth were these girls for, if not to encourage him? He was working very hard, entirely because Violet had suggested it. The result was, he was loathing the prospect of German tutorships more every day, and being more definitely attracted to gardening, which was his own original idea. He

foresaw a striking moment in the near future when he would toss the book aside, and say amid the assembled family, "Mother, I have decided to be a gardener." It would have a great effect, and beat Violet's weaker feminine efforts on the same lines hollow.

He was running through details of this scene in the early life of Charles Shovell, when Violet's letter arrived. It began by announcing great news, and Charles was led on to expect dramatic confidences about Violet's self, and a difficulty in which his advice should be demanded; and then had the shock of discovering that the "great news" concerned another pair of people altogether.

It was, however, charmingly written, as were all the documents he received from her hands; and though she dealt with unsuitable and even unsavoury things, the story was treated in a manner he could not but admire.

The bald facts seemed to be, first, that Violet had made the acquaintance of the Eccles mother, and was shocked and horrified at the family's destitution; and secondly, that she was more than a little shocked and horrified with Alice, for painting an interesting and pathetic mother much blacker than she need.

"I am afraid Alice was a little angry with me," said Violet innocently, "for calling about an hour sooner than I said. But it gave me the chance of a

quiet talk with poor Mrs. Eccles, who seems a terrible invalid, before Alice came in from her walk. She seemed in great awe of her daughter, poor woman; but she was evidently so longing for her tea, that I assured her visitors were always an Excuse. Then, when Alice appeared, I found that had been the wrong thing too. She and her mother were clearly cross with one another about something, so I did not stay long. Alice took me a walk instead on Clapham Common, which is entirely new to me. She saw me to a tram, and forgave me a little before we parted. But the remarkable coincidence occurred before that, in one part of the long history her mother told me.

“She (Mrs. Eccles) is a woman of the lachrymose order, constantly mourning the inevitable,—slightly resembling the Mock Turtle in conversation. I think, though friendly, she can never have been more than milk-and-waterish, and the Eccleses, as I know to my cost, are peppery. Alice corrected a few of her mother’s details later, but most of it she finally admitted was quite true.

“Mrs. Eccles had tried, it appeared, during the first months of her widowhood, never to let her daughter see a man, lest the wrong sort should pounce on her. That is the way, owing to her bringing up, the poor woman looks on life. She was terribly severe for a period,—a kind of Maria-Theresa and

Catherine of Russia combined: and then gave way suddenly. It seemed to me characteristic of Mrs. Eccles that in the April after her husband's death she boxed Alice's ears for accepting an apple from a grocer's man who called her a nice little bit of colour,—and that in August of the same year she let her go to stay on a Farm in Devonshire, with a cousin of her husband's, who had nine extremely handsome children, four of whom were sons. It seemed to surprise Mrs. Eccles immensely that two of the said sons instantly fell in love with Alice; because she is a person whom anything natural and inevitable would surprise: whereas outrageous combinations such as Alice and Miss Lennox she takes as a matter of course. She is not what I may call sensitive to personality,—but you at least know what I mean."

This was an instance of the kind of crumb Violet cast to the patient Charles at intervals, and which helped him through the impersonal mazes of her description. The next paragraph, however, did startle him a good deal.

"Now I come to the part where you can help me, Charles. I will shorten the surprising history as much as I can, for I know you are too busy to be bothered. The farmer Mr. Eccles' cousin married was called Peacock, and the rivals for Alice's favour were called respectively Abel and Kit. [Not

Cain, I was glad to be reassured.] Kit was Alice's favourite, and Abel, as usual, cared most for her. Alice had evidently represented Kit to her mother as a dangerous person, and gone about with an elaborately broken heart. After I had talked to her for quite a long time about the Peacock family on Clapham Common, I discovered that the said Kit was ten years old.

"I will not enlarge on the Kit part of the story, which merely illustrates one of Alice's peculiarities. Because you and dear Margery and the others are bound to be more excited about Abel. It could be no Abel but yours, I was convinced, having seen his features once with my own eyes; but with a mighty effort I said nothing whatever to hint at a suspicion, either to Mrs. Eccles, or to Alice. I thought it better not, for reasons. . . . I may add that I am afraid Father is right about the Vane being no part of the name originally, so for the good of his Soul I shall tell him nothing of it either. . . . But I am safe with you."

Charles swallowed the second crumb; and his interest being now really engaged, proceeded eagerly.

"I warn you I have now told you practically all I *know*, and what is left is largely feminine surmise. I think there is a strong probability, having definitely ruled out Kit, that Alice cared for Abel more than she will confess. Her peculiarity, to which I

alluded, is always to make herself out more flatly insensible and less finely delicate by nature than she is. Perhaps her mother being so finicking about things has pushed her into Caricature. At least, I observe that any hint of exaggerated refinement, even dropped by inadvertence, sends her flying instantly to grotesque extremes. I shall inform her this is a weakness, when I dare. . . . Examples of the above: she says her mother drinks, which I am unable to believe, having seen the woman, even with the coincidence of a rather red nose: and she said she was gone on Kit Peacock, and even more compromising expressions, when he eventually turned out to be ten years old. So I ask you, how is one to believe without reserve her statements about Abel?

“I allowed for a little pique when Alice said Abel aped his betters, because it is exactly the last thing in the world she would do herself. In fact she does the contrary. Then she said he was a dunderheaded Turnip, which seemed to refer partly to his provincial origin, and partly to imply he had not gone about his wooing in the manner she approved. But I see it would be so easy to run upon the Rocks in proposing to Alice, that I feel for poor dear Peacock more than ever.

“He was most persistent in his suit, making himself the laughing-stock of the district, according to Alice, as long as she stayed down there. He left

home soon after she did, and took work near London, doing, as even Alice admitted, extremely well. He is the eldest of the Peacocks, and by no means to be despised, really, though Alice despises him. He came to call in Brixton every single Sunday, making himself most acceptable to Mother, as Alice sarcastically said, and bringing her presents of green tea. And the more Mrs. Eccles was taken by his appearance and manners, the more unmercifully Alice dealt with him. Having seen Alice and her mother, you can imagine the kind of way it came about. Alice, you can tell on sight, demands spirit in a man before all. Poor Abel naturally found it hard to speak of what lay on his heart, and, though they met so often, never got any nearer to it. Alice said she could not stand his stuttering at last, and performed the proposal for him. And then the horrid girl had the cruelty to tell him she had accepted one of his brothers the year before, leaving him to wonder which! (It appears Kit actually had asked her to marry him, on a gate.)

“What happened after this, I cannot say. Alice only told me he went off his head, what was left of it, and shut her mouth. The whole thing occurred three years ago, when she was seventeen. Of course, I understand her attitude to men much better now, for the Peacock affair exasperated her, for some reason, almost past bearing. I incline to think it is Mothers,

Charles, as usual; and that in her heart Alice regrets her own behaviour, she speaks about it in such an odd, defiant way. These misunderstandings between excellent people are piteous things, I am sure you will agree with me. I want to work on Fate a little,—will you not help me? It seems such an opportunity, you at Peacock's elbow, and I at hers, and I hope not too romantic to be feasible. Will you tell me what you think, and not be too masculine and crushing about it? I quite suspect you are deep in his confidence by now."

"You see," Violet added, as an afterthought, "I love Miss Eccles, and am ready to love Mr. Peacock, very nearly, for loving her. She is a Great Artist, and a wonderful girl."

VI

CHARLES RETALIATES

IN this manner, the train was started. Charles enjoyed conspiracy of any kind, at least as much as Violet; and was mildly flattered at being asked to help her, even in another man's affairs. He was not of course the least "romantic" about Violet's Miss Eccles, whom he had never seen. But firstly, it was a relief to his jealous soul to know that this grasping personage was interested in another than Violet; secondly, he was by no means above curiosity; and thirdly, the quest offered an occupation, even a kind of duty, which diverted him from the study of the Teutonic tongue, and offered also by the way, an excellent opportunity for teasing Robert Brading.

Of course, nothing would induce him to betray Violet's confidence; with all those dashes under the word "private" on her envelope, that was understood. Still, the day after the letter's arrival, since Brading happened to be spending a night at the Rectory, he could not resist the temptation of

throwing a bomb among the unsuspecting family at tea-time by observing —

“I have reason to believe, my brethren, that our Vane-Peacock is in love.”

Margery blushed instantly and deeply, which delighted Charles, and deeply annoyed Mr. Brading. Charles had already taken occasion to inform Bob that, since his last visit to Glasswell, Margery had been painting Mr. Peacock, morning, noon, and night. This could not, on the face of it, be taken literally; but Robert, owing partly to Margery, and partly to home affairs to which he never alluded, was in a nervous and depressed condition, and such information was not likely to make him any happier. If he had made the smallest appeal for sympathy on either count, it need not be said, Charles would not have teased him, for he was as soft-hearted as he was light-headed. But Bob was a reserved person, and had been growing more so of late; though he seemed, silent as he was, to enjoy the air of Glasswell Rectory more than that of any house in the various neighbourhoods he frequented.

After the customary request from his mother not to be absurd —

“In love,” Charles repeated. “Not necessarily with Margery, for all her flattering attentions. More probably with some fair unknown.”

“And what reason have you for thinking so?”

said Mrs. Gibbs sharply; for she never knew if Charles was serious or not.

“Well, he does up some of the governor’s flowers every other day to send to her.”

“Charlie! Really!” Protesting cries arose.

“Yes,” said Charles, pleased by the stir he had produced. “He does it openly too, which proves the divine all-disregarding passion is upon him. Cupid scoffs at the Commandments,—except of course the one about loving your neighbour, which he occasionally approves, for want of better opportunity.”

Mrs. Gibbs begged him not to be so profane, and Maud besought him to be more accurate. The Rector, who had entered during the last sentence, laughed. The gist of the conversation was naturally repeated to him.

“I gave the man leave to send a few flowers to his mother at Deptford,” he said, looking over all the heads towards his wife. “That’s such a flowerless quarter.”

“Worse and worse,” said Charles, looking pained. “I happen to know from another authority that his mother lives in Devonshire, a quarter where flowers abound.”

“What authority?” cried a chorus; and Charles woke to find, as not infrequently in casual conversation, that his secret was in imminent danger of escaping his control.

“Of course,” he said, shifting the issue, “the V-P regards the governor’s roses as his own. That’s the first rule in the gardening manual. Also, the governor takes no trouble to conceal from him that the flowers, compared with certain other fruits of the earth that shall be nameless, are of no importance, and Peacock is a very literal person. A spade is a spade to Peacock,—a Shovell likewise.” Having thus obscured the issues to his own satisfaction, he said impressively,—“I now leave the field to Margery.”

“I have nothing to say,” she said, “with marked gentleness. Bob Brading was watching her anxiously.

“Haven’t you?” said Charles, with reproach. “I thought during your long lonely interviews, at rosy morn and dewy eve, he would have told you all about it. You are a woman, after all, which I never pretended to be. Why, the mere fact that the fellow made no bones about sitting to you suggests that he’s engaged,—or at least well-accustomed to feminine society. When I told him you would be at college in the autumn, and so out of his way, he said,—“Indeed, sir,” in a manner which implied you were less than nothing to him: and suggested simultaneously that another girl is more than something,—which proves my original con ——”

He received at this point a cushion in the mouth from Mr. Brading, who had for some time been wanting to speak.

"What led you to suppose, Shovell, that his parents lived in Devonshire?" he demanded incisively.

"He seemed to think nothing of our cream," said Charles, with the most fluent promptitude. But Robert was not so easily thrown out.

"I am going to guess," he declared. "Was it Dr. Ashwin?"

"Dr. Ashwin?" said Charles, gaping ingenuously. "Lord no, my dear fellow, why should it be?" He was relieved at the false scent, for Brading was rather sharp, and he did not care to be driven into flat mendacity, even for Violet's sake.

"All right," said Robert briefly. "I retire." He glanced swiftly at his host's benevolent face, on which a slow, faintly puzzled frown had appeared. The Rector seemed seeking some lost thread in his memory.

Seeing this expression, Robert was reminded that he alone, of all the party that met that Sunday at lunch, had perceived the possible connection between the church-going criminal in Dr. Ashwin's story, and the upright and impassive man who now attended to the Rector's peas. Robert would have

been a little ashamed of his prompt suspicion, if he had not caught an electric spark from Dr. Ashwin's eye that betrayed he shared it. Peacock's avoidance of the Ashwin party by the natural-seeming ruse of attending church had chanced to be the very step that drew suspicion upon him.

What Robert could not recollect, though he teased his memory, was whether Peacock and the Ashwin party had ever come face to face. As soon as he got Margery alone, he solved this question easily,—they had. They must have done so, at the moment when the gardener barely escaped the motor-wheels. Robert left Margery, who seemed too willing to be left, and retired, greatly vexed in his grave and orderly mind.

“I wonder if I ought to do anything about it?” thought Robert. “The man may be pilfering here for all I know. That story about his taking flowers—Shovell was fooling probably, but I don't quite like it all the same.”

A thing he liked even less he would hardly admit to himself, for it was to his kind and rather conventional nature, an almost desecrating thought. But Margery's blush haunted him, and the reports of her long morning interviews with the straight-featured scoundrel drove him, at intervals, to grind his teeth. He would not confess his jealousy to himself, and so, naturally, suffered the more.

He pondered if he would throw dignity to the winds, and speak to Charles, or go straight to the Rector at headquarters. He was sure of a fair hearing, however absurd he seemed to himself, for Mr. Gibbs was fond of him. Yet — each course seemed to have its drawbacks, and all courses to be rather low. He resolved to settle the one uncertain issue first, that of the man's identity, and wrote a note to Dr. Ashwin consisting of a single line. He received by return of post a note consisting of a single word, — "Yes."

After that, Bob took the situation to pieces anew, painfully and conscientiously. Evidently Dr. Ashwin's unwritten opinion was that the man should be given his chance, free from the black mark temporary insanity had set against his name. Dr. Ashwin was his mother's old friend, and Robert respected him. Also, he had implied clearly in the telling of his tale, that the insane fit was connected with a girl, — and in that matter Robert felt for Peacock, as man for man. Girls were the very deuce when they once took thorough possession of the mind. Margery Gibbs, this little country clergyman's daughter, was absolutely trampling upon his heart. He could not keep away from her, and kept coming back and back, though she had given him no encouragement whatever, and seemed rather to avoid him than otherwise. He had freed himself of fears

about Charles' intentions with regard to her only to be filled anew, against his better judgment, with this absurd unfounded jealousy of a handsome gardener. Margery was an artistic girl,—art is charming. What on earth had come to Robert that he could not let her dabble her little water-colour studies in peace?

He courted his torment that evening by asking to see the contents of Margery's portfolio. Complicated torture it held for him indeed: Peacock in every attitude: head, body and legs of Peacock, distant, imminent, side, front and back. The intolerable ass seemed to be equally picturesque from either side, and from every point of the compass. He seemed to be a willing model: some of the studies even appeared to exhibit a simper of gratification. Margery's little fingers trembled with pride and shyness in showing Bob the sketches. She even talked to him a little. Peacock was such a good sitter — statuesque. She did so hope Mr. Brading thought she was getting on. She did so love doing figures — better than flowers, yes.

And she had never asked Robert to sit to her,—ah, furies!

Charles, having found out little or nothing about Peacock's past during several very enjoyable interviews, bristling with his own ingenuous hints and surmises, and punctuated by arid monosyllables from the other party, felt he must find something to tell

Violet, and so informed her of the Abel-Margery complication. He thought it rather amusing, and worded it with some audacity in the style of the special number of a Cambridge University magazine; and he forgot, as witty young men will do, that Violet loved Margery, as well as Alice, the other girl indirectly concerned; and that every word he wrote would stir her sensibilities, and penetrate through any armour to her heart.

“Charles,—oh, Charles,—how *terrible!*” her next letter to him began. “Do, do reassure me that it is not as you say! You must be joking, aren’t you? At first I refused to think it possible, and then I began just to see how such a thing could occur. There is something about strength and beauty unvexed by foolish emotion and the currents of modern Thought quite dreadful in its silent magnetism. I flashed by Peacock, that Sunday in the car, but I felt even in that second of time the man’s singular fascination. Isn’t it natural for people like us, who are teased perpetually by our brains, to ask ourselves at times — what *do* brains matter after all? I am much afraid girls are like that anyhow. I am much afraid Margery may be. I always loved Hermes and Apollo more, not less, for their contented silly faces,—precisely as you love the expression in cats and cows. And picture an Apollo, for poor Margery, come to life! I am *miserable* thinking of it. You

have distressed me *exceedingly*. I thought Mr. Brading and darling Margery were so *safe*, yes, there is the truth! I am Snobbish on the subject, anything you like. I cannot allow you to treat the tragedy you hint at lightly. Tear this up."

Charles tore it unwillingly, for he thought it a charming letter, and more like those ideal "kind of things girls wrote" than any he had ever yet received in Violet's hand. He was glad, too, she was capable of that pleasant feminine weakness of being indifferent about brains in man, so long as man was personable, strong and socially presentable. All this was just as it should be; and indeed, he had suspected it, for all her evident wish to dazzle the world on paper.

Charles smiled and whistled a good deal as he walked about the house and garden, on the morning of the arrival of that letter.

VII

FRIENDS

It is hard to determine at what exact stage of their intercourse Miss Eccles discovered that Miss Ashwin had a "friend." In the circles of the young ladies from Brixton who travelled daily with Alice by tram and poured into either ear their triumphs and sorrows alternately, to have a "friend" was correct and natural. A friend (of the male sex understood) was the consequent adjunct of maturity. The young ladies walked with theirs, on affable or stately terms according to their nature, they rode or rinked with him, teased or tiffed with him, took him or were taken to theatres and picture palaces. The friend was liable to change, naturally: sometimes he changed suddenly, in "Sturm und Drang," sometimes he slid into another combination or set piece, like a kaleidoscope. More rarely he disappeared or "behaved badly," and the young lady wore the willow. Her manner of doing this, whether silently, significantly, or showily, was the surest mark of her breeding.

Alice Eccles, for instance, was known to have had a friend,—possibly several: but one in especial to

whom she "made a point of never alluding," even under the most lively provocation. This behaviour was perfect, and marked Alice down as the "real sort," a type most of the Brixton young persons would fain have imitated, but generally speaking, could not. They could never avoid, when confidence was pushed to extremes, a little abuse of the defaulting gentleman, or at least, some ornamental self-defence. Alice, in their society, never abused hers. Her designation of him as a "turnip" to Violet was exceptional. For firstly, on that occasion the confidence had already been given away, and Alice's remark a commentary and corrective, more or less humorous, to her mother's story; and secondly, Alice's terms of acquaintance with Violet were admittedly quite different from those easy bonds that connected her with her travelling companions.

How these terms came about, neither girl quite knew. They were not alike, save in a certain uncompromising turn, and love of a definite issue, whether in life or talk. They shared a contempt for dilatory or "fluffy" ways. Humour they shared too, though of a differing flavour; and curiosity. The opportunity of looking into one another's lives had the charm of novelty half-suspected, of partially imagined facts. Lastly the valuable ingredient of partisanship united them, the understanding they shared regarding the head of the firm.

Violet had been quite successful in her cunning schemes as regarded Miss Lennox. With the timely co-operation of Casselses, that lady had been practically driven out, first to a doctor, and then to Ramsgate for a month. Shop, properly so called, was shut while she was away; but she was inspired by natural kindliness and careful prompting to leave Miss Eccles the key of the studio, that she might use it for her private work. This suited Alice precisely, for she had small space or leisure at home. Apart from the business of the firm, she accepted, on her own account, trousseau and under-linen orders, to fill in Lennoxes' slack times; for, though Alice took a special pride in those cutting and tailoring talents which verge upon the man's department, and sniffed a little at the feminine "white work," she really enjoyed it for a change, especially when she had a companion. She was engaged now on a large double order at short notice, and when Violet proffered her services, Alice accepted them gratefully, and without scruple; for in the purely feminine department, even she admitted Miss Ashwin's "meticulous" fairy fingers were of value.

Their friendship flourished, encouraged by the common interest. Two girls cannot sew together, especially at the delicate wardrobes destined for birth and marriage, without a constant inspiration to intimate chatter; and Alice was soon telling Violet

things she had never breathed to a girl before. She was aware she got less confidence than she gave, not by any design on Violet's part, but because such reticence belonged to her self-knowledge and susceptibility. Violet had the fear of herself that results from habitual, life-long introspection; she did not easily betray the inner stores she had counted so often and so carefully. She greatly preferred to listen to, and comment on other histories.

So Alice enlarged on the theme of friends,—masculine preferred,—and tried with practised guile to find out more about Mr. Shovell. The terms on which Violet and this gentleman appeared to be beat everything Alice had ever heard of, in history or fiction. She and Miss Ashwin, for a long time, seemed to be in danger of an utter failure to adjust their ideas on the subject, though they, or rather Alice, hammered at it constantly.

"Either you're fond of him, or you're not," said Alice. "That's only sense."

"Of course I'm fond of Charles," said Violet. "He is a quite delightful person. He is something like a nice baby. If you saw him once, you'd understand."

"How old did you say he was?" said Alice. "Twenty-three? Well, you know what you're after at twenty-three, according to my experience."

"I *won't* misunderstand you," said Violet. "You

mean he is after me. But you are mistaken, Alice. Now, let me consider: I won't call him friend, because that seems to have a quite unheard-of signification. Admirer, I suppose, is worse."

"Much the same," said Alice, biting a thread. "Admirer is down the scale a bit, and follower is lower still."

"*Please* don't tell Father I have a follower," said Violet.

"Well," said Alice, "he followed you here. Monday he called, and you went down to see him, wasn't it?"

"Yes. He brought me a note from his sister."

"Oh yes!" said Alice.

"I wish," said Violet, "I had asked him up; but he was a little shy of disturbing us."

"He would be," said Alice. Silence between the pair.

"I am afraid, Alice, you are deficient in imagination," said Violet. "It would perhaps not be possible to you to have a Charles. Still, you had a Kit once, I remember. Turn your mind upon Kit, and then imagine,—hard."

"It's no good imagining men are the same at ten and twenty-three," said Alice, "because they're not. If anyone's imagination is off it, it's yours, my dear."

"Was Kit clever?" said Violet sweetly.

"Rather!" said Alice, glowing. "Sharp as they're

made. All the Peacocks were, but Abel. It's a wonder to me Abel ever learnt to speak. I don't see what this has to do with the subject."

"I am trying to project my idea of friendship upon your mind, that's all. Did other people understand Kit's nature, or only you?"

"There were nine people besides me," said Alice, reflecting on the matter, "ten counting the charwoman, who spoilt him regularly. His mother was silly about him, being the last. I told her he'd go to the bad, if they all went on at the rate they were going; but I couldn't help kissing him when he sat upon my knee."

Violet admitted sadly that the case was not the same. Alice had stopped work, thinking of Christopher Peacock, her early love. Her face, as she dreamed on him, rocking in Miss Lennox's chair, was beautiful. Violet, having looked at her for an instant, hid her own face in her hands.

"What's the matter, deary?" said Alice, starting round.

"Oh," said Violet, "it's only so *wicked* you should be here, and not in a beautiful farm, with children. Of course that's where you ought to be."

"Not other people's children, thank you," said Alice.

"Not other people's, no — your own. Alice, listen. I am going to be terribly impertinent. Could

you not forgive Abel, if you found him again, and he still cared for you?"

"Come to that, I know he cares," said Alice.

"Do you?" said Violet quickly. "How?"

"See those flowers?" Alice nodded to the bunch of roses in Miss Lennox's blue vase. "Where do you suppose they come from to me regularly, twice a week?"

Miss Ashwin looked blank a moment. Conspirators are prepared for most things, but this stroke was unexpected. She had innocently admired a rose in the bunch that morning, because it reminded her of Uncle Arthur's garden at Glasswell. What if the flowers really did come thence? What a painful suspicion to drop on a hero of romance!

"Tell me a little more," she said to Alice discreetly.

"The one thing Abel and me always agreed about, was flowers," said Alice. "Down there at the farm, the way he kept his mother's garden was a sight. Later he had an allotment near London, and sent to me straight from there. I suppose, wherever he is, he has got one now."

"But don't you know where he is,—by the boxes?"

"No," said Alice briefly. "He brings 'em up, I suppose, or sends them by hand. Abel was sly about nothing, always; that's the way of blockheads."

“And you accept them?” said Violet, her eyebrows up. “I only want to know, dear,—is that all right?”

Alice grinned at her cheerfully. “All correct,” she said. “He directs to Mother, with a line inside, hoping she’ll accept, from hers respectfully. *That’s* done in the best circles.”

Violet leant back in her chair again. Really, the situation was rather comic, but she dared not laugh. Perhaps Uncle Arthur had given Peacock leave to send. Poor Mrs. Eccles was his cousin, after all, and a kind of invalid. All might be well, though it looked a little shady on the surface. And it was nice (though funny) of Peacock to remember Alice with such clockwork regularity, when she had rejected him with crushing scorn.

“It’s a great thing,” she said delicately to Alice, “To have a taste in common, isn’t it? I think roses are a charming attention. Now that sort of thing, Alice, my friend Mr. Shovell omits to do. Mightn’t that be a fine distinction between the sorts?”

“I daresay,” said Alice. “*He’s* a gentleman,—the genuine article.”

“That is not what I meant; please don’t be disagreeable. I meant a distinction between the sort of friend Charles is, and will always be, to me, and Abel is, or would fain be, to you.”

Alice laughed. “As you like,” she said. “It may be the other thing I said as well.”

"No," said Violet. "For a lover, it is correct, if a little old-fashioned. There is the Marquis de Ferrolles, who is as fine a gentleman as anyone would wish to see."

"Does he send you flowers?" said Alice sharply.

"No. He sends lovely nosegays to Mother, though,—which I put in water. Not the least the same as your case," she added hastily. "No compliment at all to me intended. He is simply Mother's follower, not mine, do you see? Of that I have evidence and to spare."

"I don't like that word in your mouth," observed Miss Eccles. "I wish I hadn't used it. Everyone should talk their own way, unless they want to be mistaken. I don't like the insinuation either, Miss Ashwin, to tell the truth. I don't know much of Marquises and their doings, naturally. But even if it's the case as you say, she's your mother, and it doesn't seem to me you ought to ——"

"You are perfectly right, Alice," said Violet piteously. "But didn't I tell you we were fast! I'm hardly fit to consort with. I thought you would be prepared."

"I saw your mother," said Alice, gathering dignity. "And naturally, I knew what to expect. Very well. You know me, and you can leave me to gather the rest, without making what I might call glaring statements. That's what the newspapers do,—the cheaper ones. Personally ——"

"Personally, you call it questionable taste," said Violet. "I know you do, dear. So do I. So does Charles, probably. But that's just *me*, all over."

"You mean you speak to *him* about it?" Miss Eccles' severity grew blank. She ceased work to gaze at Violet.

"I am afraid I do, and have done from the first meeting. Does that make me quite impossible?"

"And you call yourself reticent," said Alice, scoring with a thimble on the table. "Fine lot of reticence about that."

"But, Alice, listen." Miss Ashwin leant forward to reason with her critic. "When it's a glaring fact, why not a glaring statement?"

"Because,"—Alice walked over her calmly,— "when it's your mother, you gloss it over. Facts and statements alike, you do. Mothers *are* mothers, and I'll hear nothing against that view."

Another pause. There was a weak place in Miss Eccles' admirable armour, and Violet was wondering whether she had courage to attack it. She gathered courage, consciously and by degrees.

"Alice," she said. "*You* told *me* once that your mother drinks."

Miss Eccles blushed charmingly. "So she does," she said hastily, "but that's a kind of joke, and different."

"I don't believe," said Violet with melancholy

intensity, "it's even true. I think it far worse to make charges against your mother that are false, than even to make true ones. There!"

"Is that your opinion?" said Alice.

"It is," said Violet. Silence.

"Sometimes I've wondered," said Alice, "if I would tell you about that, some time. But then I've thought, better not. You might not understand me. It's a joke with vexation at the root of it, like so many jokes."

"Dear Alice," murmured Violet. "No, you must not trouble to tell me. I believe I know the greater part."

"Abel's at the bottom of it," said Alice. "Did you guess that? Oh no, little darling, not you! I don't know what it was in Abel that rubbed me up continually, making me do and say what I'd rather not. Well, perhaps you saw through the drinking puzzle, being such a clever pussy."

"I have regretted ever since," said Violet, "that I let her drink so much that day. I put two and two together, which is a thing mere Board-school children can do, very soon after that. I thought it funny of you not to warn me, since you knew strong tea was dangerous for her. I have found out about the craving from Father, and the possible results, and almost torn my hair to think I did not follow your meaning more readily. It seems so innocent, doesn't it, in the early stages."

"So it does," said Alice. "You mean to tell me, you went and talked to a doctor about such things?" She shuddered, quite genuinely. "I wouldn't have thought it of you."

"I wanted to know," said Violet. "And Father is beautifully clear, even when he treads among Horrors. Of course there are some things — I often wonder how he can bear it himself."

"Oh, men," said Alice.

"Father is not quite a man," said Violet. "No,— stop,— I won't hear you on that subject." She held up a hand, and Alice laughed. Alice had seen fit to judge Dr. Ashwin far too hastily, on the evidence of her one meeting with him, the day he was being slowly forced to miss a train. As Violet contended, no one can be at their best on such an occasion. "Tell me how Abel was responsible for the drinking-puzzlement," she said, to shift the subject.

"I'll try to," said Alice, stopping work. "I can't use your words. I told you Abel drove me mad by always setting up to be better than he was. Some people admire that; Mum, for instance, but I can't stick pretension. The trouble with Abel all along was, he took in Mother too easily. And he thought, no doubt, in the cunning way of silly people, if he could diddle Mum, she being the genuine article, he could diddle me. He did it well, I can tell you! At times I got tired, teasing him to no purpose. I

couldn't catch him off his guard, and he wouldn't lose his temper, nor would he take a glass, for all my pressing him. A blue ribbon, church-going man, my dear, and one of Nature's gentlemen,— that's what Mother said, so as to get round the little drawback of the name. He read the Bible to her before he left,— might have been a blessed curate by his soapy voice — no, I couldn't stick it anyhow. I believed there was something behind, some devil, and my devil got awake in me longing to bring it out. I told him Mother drank, that day we had it out together, when he was singing her praises. I said it just to see him blink and stop. But even then he didn't lose his temper. I don't know if he believed it, I'm sure,— I don't know if he even took it in,— but that's what suggested the fashion of speech to me, in the beginning. I didn't mean exactly to be funny, but it relieved me somehow. She *does* drink," finished Alice, as though arguing with herself.

"And you never found a devil in the poor man, after all," said Violet.

"Didn't I?" said Alice grimly. "All right." She turned to her work.

"You might at least have sent him away for three years, to prove himself worthy of you," argued Violet in Abel's interest. "Like the stories."

"Yes, I might," said Alice, working hard.

“Instead of that I sent him away for three months, and he spent ’em in disgracing his father’s name.”

“Alice!”

“Yes?”

“Is that true?”

Miss Eccles lifted her proud head on her fine neck, and as she gazed full at Violet, her beautiful long eyes were full of tears.

“I ought never to have told you, of course,” she said. “I don’t know how you drag things out, I’m sure. But I don’t think you’ll let it go further. That’s why I broke with Abel, really. A police officer called — never mind for what. Mum said it was my fault, called me names,—she was half frantic with the shame of it,—no wonder! I was frightened to death, thinking of his mother. She’d been so good to me. . . . If you’d seen him, sitting week after week in our front room, like an image in his clean collar, you’d have been frightened too. It’s his collar I kept thinking of . . . it’s not fair to turn on a girl like that.” She had covered her eyes with her hand, striving to find words, but unable, evidently. “Oh, my God, that night! — and I was only seventeen. That taught me what men are, once for good. I’d never trust them now.”

“They set him on his legs again,” she resumed

after a period, when Violet had consoled her. "He fell very soft, considering. He didn't deserve half he got. The Peacocks do get round people, same way my little Kit did once. I'll never see Kit again, nor them down there. Not that they'd really think I'm answerable,—they're blessed good folk,—but I couldn't face them, not with that on my mind. I remember it at nights sometimes,—the hot nights like that one was. . . . To see the viciousness spring out of a man's face, my dear,—all the bad of him at once,—I hope you never may. He'd been so quiet up to then, nice-spoken and all." She waited, mastering her emotion steadily. "Oh well," she said, "I expect he'll marry a lady. That's what he's fitted for best, and what I told him to do."

"Alice!" Violet implored. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Don't I, dear? You never saw him. Abel's all right. He's not a bad fellow really. He did behave badly, but I think he learnt his lesson. He's a finer man to look at than my father was, and Father made a good marriage, I mean according to that standard. Mum's father was a bishop's chaplain, and if that's not all right, what is?"

By this time she had winked her tears away, and smiled at Violet through the mist that remained. She looked exquisitely lovely, and the other girl,

still and attentive, could not draw her eyes away. It has a nobility all its own, that resignation of a proud spirit to lasting self-reproach.

"When Abel was on his feet again," she told Violet gently, "I wrote a line, just to say I was glad to hear. It was just all I could manage. He never answered it."

"Except by flowers," said Violet. She mused a little longer, her chin supported on her hand, her grey eyes resting upon Alice. "Peacock's Farm," she said, "I suppose his home is called."

"Holybrook Farm, near Barnstaple," said Alice quickly. "But he's not there, I know that. They wouldn't have him. His father drew the line, after — what I was telling you. Jem'll get the farm,— the next. That's justice." She bit her lip.

"Poor Abel," said Violet softly. She turned her eyes upon her work, which had lain untouched for ten minutes at least. "Darling, I have set this sleeve all wrong," she observed, with the same air of pensive detachment, her head still resting on her hand. "It looks extraordinary, even for the youngest child."

Alice snatched it from her to examine. "It's all right," she said, after a moment. But the talk turned upon technicalities, whither it is not necessary to follow it further.

VIII

A MARQUIS BECOMES OF INTEREST

MATTERS had not advanced much further than this, when Violet broke down. It was a very hot season, and Alice had warned her that she would, if she persisted in doing without a holiday. Violet replied that nothing but regular occupation saved her from suicide, in the conditions of accumulating horror at home; and Alice pointed out sensibly that such misleading exaggeration was a symptom.

As a fact, the girl looked whiter every day during their period of busy seclusion, and the state of desperation to which she was always subject at intervals seemed to have become a permanency. Fortunately, as she told Alice, her "off times" and her father's were the same,—thus making it possible to Violet to exist amid horror, apparently, in order to be at his side.

One morning she walked in with the news that Lennoxes was honoured with an order from Mrs. Claude Ashwin, and that the forewoman of the said concern was to go up and see about it immediately. Alice allowed herself an objurgation for the

sake of appearances; but she pinned on her hat with a spark in her eye which suggested some private interest in the prospect. She had never forgotten Mrs. Ashwin, and mentioned her at intervals as though, like Mr. Gibbs, she was permanently ready for further light on the subject. She mounted the car, therefore, looking extremely haughty for Joliffe's benefit, and swirled away in state to Violet's home, where she and Eveleen had a short armoured controversy.

Miss Eccles arrived very soon at the gist of the affair, for all Mrs. Ashwin's languor in detailing it. There was nothing abstruse in the idea, indeed, being Eveleen's. She had pretended to want a morning-gown, but what she really wanted was a maid. She desired also to save money, and replace Léontine on cheaper terms. She was going to stay at a smart country place, with some grandees at whose title Alice schemed to arrive in vain. The little London girl who had hitherto "managed" for her was not sufficient to support Mrs. Ashwin's dignity in these surroundings; and she had done Miss Eccles the honour of thinking of her in Fanny's stead. Nothing was to come of it eventually, so far as Alice could discover, but Mrs. Ashwin's convenience,—a thing for which, in her own household, the gods did strive.

Whereupon,—having collected all the evidence conscientiously, that she might be sure of wasting

no effect,— Alice uprose in all her young splendour, and told Mrs. Ashwin what she thought. What Alice thought we cannot presume to put down, for she considered herself insulted by the proposal, and that was a situation that suited her and her best vocabulary to perfection. She had whole phrases ready-made and stored against the necessity, some of which had languished long unuttered; for there was sufficient vivacity in Alice's outer aspect to check insult, as a rule, on the brink. Her speech, though lively, was not long; but the result was, as Alice had hoped, to "do Mrs. Ashwin's business" completely. It also did Alice's, by the way. The fact was, nobody had ever so treated Eveleen before, and the novel sensation stirred her rather agreeably. She had genuinely thought the girl would jump at the opportunity of exchanging that stuffy little hole at Battersea for Dering Park, one of the finest places in England. Since she did not jump, however, Eveleen abandoned it calmly, and recurred to the question of costumes. In these matters, her instinct was sure; and, as a result of Alice's eloquence, and the somewhat prolonged contemplation of Alice's clothes and figure that eloquence allowed, Eveleen gave her more commissions than she had intended, one the remodeling of an important theatre-cloak.

"I am going down to the country this afternoon," she observed, as Miss Eccles gathered up the things

to depart. "Do you happen to know if Violet intends to come with me?"

"I presume she does not, Mrs. Ashwin," said Alice in her customer-y manner, "since I left her settling in for a day's work at Battersea. I've no doubt she'd be the better for it, though. If I were you, I'd make her go."

Eveleen did not answer at once, and Alice, charged as she was in advance, rather trembled for the effects of her own insolence.

"Is she doing it out of obstinacy?" said the mother at last, as though to herself.

"You never thought she would keep it up, did you?" said Alice. "I dare say it rather puts you out."

"What's she looking like?" said Eveleen. "I have hardly seen her lately," she added, as the girl swung round upon her to glare.

"Oh,—she's looking thin and pretty as usual. Tired a bit,—she feels the heat."

"Her clothes are all right," murmured Eveleen.

"Looks like hers don't keep," said Alice cheerfully. "She's the kind that looks ugly after a bad night."

Eveleen turned, her chin resting upon a ringed hand. "What do you call her, may I ask?"

Alice set her lips. "Miss Ashwin, I call her. She calls me Alice."

"Why don't you call her Violet?"

"'Cause I won't," said Miss Eccles; adding haughtily, "and because I can't pronounce it."

"You can't?"

"No: none of us Cockneys can."

Eveleen left the point, as though satisfied, and mentioned that she would be coming through town again on such a day, and could be fitted at such a time, if convenient to Miss Lennox.

"We'll make it convenient," said Alice, calmly, and appended as a happy afterthought, "I am your height and shape, more or less, so Miss Ashwin can fit, provisionally, on me." Then she took her departure, and drew a breath when she got outside.

"I cheeked your mother, dear," she explained to Violet. "I'm bound to, or I should be afraid of her. I hope she's not offended, for your sake. She didn't show any sign."

"She never does," said Violet. "That is Mother's secret. I only wish to goodness I could imitate it, and Father too; but for the life of us both, we can't."

As it happened, however, Eveleen was less content with life than her cool appearance had led Alice to expect. She had made up her mind to have Violet with her for this visit, and for more reasons than one. In the first place, the old master of Dering Park had sent a personal request for the girl, who

was a favourite with him, and it is worth while in life to pay attention to requests from such quarters. So Mrs. Ashwin had allowed it, though doubtfully, the first place in her considerations. Next, owing to Miss Eccles' recent show of spirit, she was now condemned to go without assistance, and her daughter's clever hands were better than nothing, as she had frequently proved. Violet was both adroit and obliging, like Claude, and she naturally had more experience than Claude in details of feminine toilette. This was worth consideration, beyond any doubt at all. To conclude, and say all in a word, she was taking M. de Fervolles with her in Claude's place,—uninvited; and though she had no instant's doubt she could extend her ægis to him, and make anyone she chose to bring in her train acceptable to her hosts, it did seem preferable even to Eveleen,—since she intended to exhibit him as a *prétendu* for her daughter,—that the daughter in question should be on view.

These practical thoughts swam slowly across her horizon at intervals during the peaceful morning hours, and affected, beyond any doubt, the trend of subsequent events: which, with due respect to Mrs. Ashwin's mental methods, we detail in order.

The Marquis did not appear to lunch, though an empty place proclaimed he had been expected. After

the meal, finding herself for once alone with her husband, Eveleen curled herself sidelong in a chair in an attitude that signified she was in a mood to converse. The girlish attitude was charming, and Claude might have been not unwilling on his side, had he been at leisure. As it was, he had his back turned to her at the bureau, and was engaged in making notes on letters against time, and interviewing his secretary, at intervals, simultaneously.

Eveleen looked at his back discontentedly. She supposed he was "in a temper," — her own term for certain moods. She had not been thinking much about him lately, but when she did turn her thoughts that way, it was annoying not to have his notice in return. He had been tiresomely inattentive to de Fervolles too, though she had dangled that gentleman in his foreground very conspicuously. It did not occur to Claude, apparently, that he could be useful in the matter of Violet. He was, at times, culpably dull and unobservant, considering his reputation. He looked right through things which might really be said to stare him in the face; and attended to other disagreeable trifles instead.

At the present moment he was attending to a letter he had taken from his pile, reading it in his singularly still manner of concentration,— no temper apparent to the view. When Eveleen remarked, just to open the conversation, that he was turning

grey behind his ear, he said, "Really?" in a perfectly abstracted tone, and continued reading.

"Who's that letter from?" said Eveleen.

He moved the sheet so that the signature, "Elinor Brading," became visible to her,—nothing else. This laziness was revolting to Eveleen, who liked to be answered politely. Presently he jerked the sheet aside with a youthful gesture, and observed, to himself, not her,— "I wish women ever realised the point at which the friendly obligation and the other divide."

"Let me see," said Eveleen, stretching a white hand to the sheet.

"Sorry," said Claude, abstracting, folding, and pocketing it firmly. Eveleen frowned at the discourtesy. However, on reflection, she found she was unable to be jealous of Lady Brading, who valued Claude in a manner she could not imitate, certainly, — but in no manner to matter the least. She had been his sister's friend, and was,—Eveleen calculated at leisure,—older than he. Further, she was older even than her age with grief and anxiety, so she really could not be taken seriously by anybody.

"I suppose Elinor wants you to attend him again," she remarked, "now he is weaker and less cantankerous."

"That was not her object in writing," said Claude.

"Of course you would never admit it was," said

Eveleen contentedly. She curled a little more in her chair, which proved comfortable, and laid her head down sidelong. He was only writing things now, and could not long keep up his pretence of being too busy to look at her. He spoke soon, sure enough, though absently.

"Joliffe's late, isn't he?" he said. "Are you going down alone?"

"De Fervolles," enumerated Eveleen, "and Violet. I have sent him down to fetch her."

Instantly she got a glance. "Sent de Fervolles? What on earth for?"

"I thought it would amuse him," said Eveleen, "and I wanted a little more time. That girl Fanny is so slow with the boxes."

"I see," he said, turning back again. "You sent him with sealed orders, did you? Or trusted him to persuade her?"

"I never suppose a man like that will not use his tongue," said Eveleen. "As for sealed orders, I said I wanted her. Frenchmen never imagine mothers can be disobeyed." She rolled her lip out prettily. "Anyhow," she concluded, "he will enjoy a scene, and I do not."

"A change of scene," Claude suggested, opening a new letter. "I don't think you can assume he is not at home in an atelier, you know. You can assume nothing about those persons."

"The woman is there," said Eveleen. A pause, during which, though he knew better, he did not contradict her. Between those two girls, indeed, he was mildly sorry for de Fervolles. His lip curled over his reading as he pictured the interview.

"Do you like him, Claude?" Eveleen demanded.

"Well,—he reads decently," said Claude at leisure: or rather not at leisure, for he was writing.

"I thought you would notice that," said Eveleen with satisfaction. "I told him to take an opportunity to read that poem to Violet, after I had gone out last night."

"Ah! I fear the opportunity did not occur."

"Why not?"

"Because," said he, having apparently weighed the question accurately in all its bearings while he addressed his letter, "I haled him off to billiards. He is quite a good player by our rules, as you said. He must have wasted his youth in England."

"How selfish you are, Claude," said Eveleen with acrimony.

"It's so rare to find a man I can play with," he excused himself equably. "Besides, Puss was all right. She and Ford were doing music, weren't you, Ford? Making noise enough, anyhow."

"Hope we didn't shake the table, sir," said the

young secretary, who had come in to fetch the finished notes. The doctor's basement billiard-room, it should be said, was just beneath the drawing-room piano.

Eveleen gazed at Mr. Ford as if she could not see him. He did not exist, naturally, beside the Marquis de Fervolles, and he ought to know it. It was so like Claude to choose a musical secretary, regardless of her convenience. She began to fear she must start planning all over again, in Violet's interest, with these intensely stupid men about her.

Presently, as Joliffe still delayed, and Claude, her natural prey, still pretended to be occupied, she produced a plan. The plan showed signs of what was, for Eveleen, laboured thought, and her husband received it respectfully. She had at least thought some way in advance, as far ahead as Violet's birthday. Violet's nineteenth birthday fell in early December. Eveleen proposed to give a party for it on her return to town; a young party, she explained, smallish, not more than twenty couples,—nice, of course.

"Twenty?" said Claude with solemnity. "And nice,—*and* young? I doubt if you will find so many in the world. Violet," he added, "has not many friends."

"I am sure I don't know why," said Eveleen. "She's been bridesmaid often enough." After nam-

ing in a few more or less worthy young people who occurred to her, she said:

"The Gibbs girls could come up,— and the Brad-
ing boy."

"I shouldn't count on him," said Claude. "Forrest has decided to operate again, she says in this. That with him is a last resort."

"How tiresome," said his wife, and brooded. "There's that young Shovell,—it's a good name enough. I suppose if we have the girls there's no avoiding him."

"If you consult Violet's own preferences,— none at all."

"Oh," said Eveleen. A masterly pause ensued. "Can we avoid the mother?"

"Not if you want Arthur Gibbs," he returned. "Otherwise, for a young party, easily."

"I supposed you would want Arthur Gibbs. Besides, he christened her, didn't he?"

"I believe so," said Claude. "You were present." She applied to him constantly for facts as she did to the clock, or any other domestic machine for saving labour; and occasionally the trick vexed him. "You will be asking me how old she is next," he said, rising at last, and moving, in a slightly worried manner, to the hearth. Eveleen's calm persistence had evidently overthrown the other engagements,— which was a passing satisfaction.

"I shall not,—her age is the point. I told de Fervolles she was coming out next year. He will give her something good, probably."

There was a pause. "I say,—is *he* to be of a young party?"

"Naturally. I am doing it for him. He was sounding me about pearls the other day,—some he had seen in Paris."

"I am giving her pearls," said the doctor swiftly. "He can leave his filth in France."

"Claude!" She passed over the unguarded temper of his tone. "Are you really? Where are they?"

"Lenz has been collecting for me for a year," he said, relapsing into his ordinary manner. "They'll be ready for the *début* all right. I will show you sometime if you like."

"You never gave me pearls," said Eveleen, as though considering.

He looked at her silently. He had given her various gems, all distinctive as they were beautiful, and he always knew what she was wearing. The night before, not for the first time, she had worn stones his memory could not trace, though they marked a taste as fastidious as his own. Oddly enough, none of his many rivals had ever stirred him as this Parisian did; and her attitude on the subject, whether it was to be laid to natural cunning or self-

deception, drove him to his wits' end to deal with adequately. He could not keep at her level. Do what he would, his thoughts outran her, and came back only to despise. She must know what she was about, with such a man. In her own affairs, the matters of instinct, Eveleen was not stupid,—he could wish she had been more so. The man was not a fool either. De Fervolles was his own sort, with a difference, which may have accounted for his instantaneous aversion. He had all the stage trickery at command, and stepped through his part very competently, as though accustomed.

Claude intended personally to play his own part, in the somewhat threadbare situation offered him, as badly as possible, in order to put the ruffling hero out; and he had silently sworn not to let Violet play a part at all. He was far too observant to deceive himself with any sentiment about girls' innocence. The girl was his girl, and the chances were she had seen more than the half, even of what he saw himself, in the short periods that she had spent, of late, at home. But he would not have her spirit offended by any direct contact with the tinsel and truck of the vaudeville atmosphere, to which his wife seemed to take so kindly. If need were, Violet must know the facts, but always interpreted by him. She should see life through his eyes, since for her sake he had kept his vision clear. Such was

the vow he was repeating, while he watched his wife with cool dark eyes unmoved.

And Eveleen, silent as he was, was conscious it was war. She rolled out her lip under his scrutiny, allowing her amusement at his childishness to be visible, fastened her eyes just below his chin while she buttoned her glove, and then turned her back and walked to the window to watch for the car.

Her expression, if it had been seen from the street, would have been rather dangerous. Claude should know better, by this time, than to dare her like this. She had spent considerable pains in the matter of de Fervolles, who was, her husband could not deny, an excellent *parti*. It was very doubtful if Violet deserved as good, considering all things. Eveleen did not care for him particularly,—till Claude defied her. Now, of course, if the car came back with him alone, as her husband seemed to expect,—well, a natural opportunity, with full leisure for retaliation requiring no effort at all on her part, lay before her. It was far easier than answering Claude in conversation: it was also by far more effective. Her husband could not accompany her to Dering,—or would not: Eveleen was vague as to how far his professional excuses carried weight, for he had mounted the ladder so fast as to confuse her slightly: and anyhow, it was very horrid of him not to give her the pearls when she reminded him.

The world had but to look at Eveleen and her daughter together to admit the justice of the last accusation, however they might cavil at the rest.

Violet was adamant to the Marquis' embassy, and would not even see him. Little Sally Pepper, broadly gaping, brought up his card. Violet sent it down again with "*désolée,—regrets,—impossible,*" traced across a corner in her delicate hand.

"Say Miss Ashwin is busy to the eyes if he asks you, Sally," said Violet, and sank back on the sofa where she had been resting when the message came. Her lips were set rather comically, and she was pale.

"That's Mother," she explained to Alice. "I wish she wouldn't goad the poor wretch to follow me about. It's too degrading for him." When Violet was rather exhausted and nervous, the strongest terms of her vocabulary came out.

Alice, concealed behind the window-curtain, looked down to observe the fate of the embassy. "He's sending the man!" she exclaimed with contempt.

"How faint-hearted," said Violet, with her eyes shut. "He might attempt the assault. They are so hideously alarmed of English girls where he comes from. Did you know that? People like Mother never realise how acute the feeling is. . . .

Yes," as a knock sounded at the door. "Come in, Joliffe."

As Joliffe approached, she held out one hand to him, and laid the fingers of the other to her lips. The gesture admitted the retainer to her conspiracy. Joliffe only failed to fulfil the dramatic requirements by not stooping to the hand. He did not refuse to take it, however, for Violet's household adored her, to a man.

"I would never have come of myself, Miss," he apologised. "I knew it was no good. But the Marquis was put out about it to that extent ——"

"He's afraid of displeasing Mother," said Violet. "And equally afraid of appearing to elope with me in the eye of all Battersea. They do so hate to be ridiculous. Now, let me think." She put a fine hand across her face. "He will tell her I am obdurate probably, and originale,—French for rude. Three words on his own card were certainly that. You, Joliffe, will tell her nothing. You have not seen Miss Ashwin, do you hear? We have a large order in, suddenly?"

"Mourning," said Miss Eccles, behind.

"Court mourning," said Violet. "A poor prince."

"As you will, Miss," said Joliffe sadly. Thinking of his mistress, he made a dutiful effort. "It's very nice down at Dering, in the park, just now,"

he observed. "Lord Dering asked for you special, I heard."

"How did you hear?" The girl threw a glint at him. "Dering's a sweet place, I adore it. Are my things packed, Joliffe?"

"Yes, Miss: waiting at the house."

"What a waste of labour." She sighed bitterly. "The unhappy Fanny, I suppose. See it's not put on, will you? We are not leaving town at present. We are detained."

Joliffe looked at Alice, who seemed to him a sensible girl. Alice telegraphed that she had tried, and failed.

"Is it a bad day for the doctor?" asked Violet, having reflected for a space.

"Full up, Miss. He's doing Mr. Forrest's work at the hospital this week as well."

"The atrocious poacher,—I know he is. Is he at home to-night?"

The chauffeur shook his head. "Dinner and meeting at the Club. Both the cars in use, since Mrs. Ashwin goes down so late. I've been wondering, Miss Violet, how you will get back."

"I was also wondering," said Violet. "But I prayed for inspiration, and it came. A passing omnibus,—at my own time. Liberty to miss one, if I choose, and take the next. Infinitely preferable, I assure you."

Joliffe shook his head at her, reproving. "You'll be back to dinner, Miss?"

"No,—tell Mason. I shall stay overtime with Miss Eccles, and get done." She smiled sweetly at Joliffe, who therewith gave her up. She was a singularly obstinate young lady: and to-day she was singularly pale.

"I could get that window open, if you liked," he said, gazing thoughtfully upward at the skylight, through which the concentrated glare of an August noon was pouring down. "It might make a bit of noise."

"Good heavens, what does the noise matter?" she cried. "Air is what I want." Both her hands were across her eyes in an instant, at this offer of real service.

The chauffeur tugged the window open; and then, looking round the room once with a cautious eye, guardedly uncritical, since Miss Violet had chosen it, departed down the stairs.

"*Elle refuse?*" said the Marquis, with a despairing gesture.

"Refuses, sir," said Joliffe. "Nothing further, sir?" They drove off.

"How is the interior, where Mademoiselle inhabits?" said de Fervolles curiously.

"Very nice, sir," said Joliffe. "Nice little place."

"She works there?" said the Marquis; for Eve-

leen had left him in complete darkness as to Violet's daily habits.

"Presumably, sir," said Joliffe, very grave. He seemed to be interested in the traffic on the bridge.

"Ladies — young ladies — do this with you?"

"Very frequently, sir. A friend of Miss Ashwin's, Lady Joan Dering, does bookbinding in the season in St. Martin's Lane. I may say, sir, it is freely done."

"Freely," murmured the Marquis. "She is alone there,— no company? Aha, this is better,— women, of course. And at nights she returns to her parents, — to the nest. Strange, an only child." He mused. "She has not broken with her mother? Quarrelled?"

"Certainly not, sir," said Joliffe, indignant at the implied scandal in his family. "Mrs. Ashwin thought Miss Violet might change her mind, consequent upon a special message from his lordship. That is all."

"Aha!" said the Marquis. "His lordship,— what age?"

"Eighty-one, sir," said Joliffe impassively, and the conversation closed. The Marquis had criticised the car on the way down; and in any case, Joliffe had no taste for Frenchmen.

IX

A STUDIO INCIDENT

THE embassy had a result, however, somewhat later in the day; for Joliffe, righteously or not, managed to get a few words through to headquarters. Knowing his master, he judged that would be sufficient. Then he went down to Dering with his mind at rest.

At half-past seven, his first leisure, having dressed for dinner to be on the safe side, Claude shot down to Battersea in the smaller car, and, leaving the hired driver in charge, mounted the stairs two steps at once. He had been there once before, so he hesitated neither as to the house, nor floor, nor door. Before he knocked at the door, he heard lively chattering and laughter within, sufficient to reassure his accumulated anxiety; and entering, he discovered an excited group of young people.

There was a cry of protest at his own appearance, and he stopped halfway across the room, lifting the flimsy curtain with one hand. It was evidently, by his attitude, a highly dramatic moment in somebody's career.

"Oh, this is too much!" cried Violet in indigna-

tion. "Caitiffs — knaves — they have betrayed me. Silence now, Charles,— Alice,— no word, if you love me."

They did love her, apparently, for, though Alice had been scolding and Charles talking nonsense simultaneously, silence instantly succeeded.

Dr. Ashwin took in the scene. His daughter, completely colourless, but much the most collected member of the party, lay upon the faded little couch near the window, which was opened widely, to admit all the air possible on an almost breathless evening. Miss Eccles, in undress,— for her blouse was tossed on the floor,— dishevelled and wonderful to behold, was kneeling by her, one arm still passed about her anxiously. Charles Shovell,— of all impertinent interlopers,— clothed in flannels, was erect beyond them, with one knee in a chair, and his hands on the back of it, apparently watching Violet intently. Not that there was anything remarkable in that: it was obviously the considerate thing to do, since no gentleman would wish to look twice at Miss Eccles' bare arms. He was flushed and smiling, but the smile had a slightly dazed quality, remarkable in a hero, as though in the recent dramatic incident, the worst shock had been his.

And that indeed was the fact. He had come up to town for a cricket match; and having spent the day merrily with friends, was returning at ease.

Being Charles, he missed the train he had wanted at Victoria, and saw, during the interval while he kicked his heels about the station, a train for Battersea departing. He thought there could be but one chance in ten that Violet had not already returned home, but that one chance was worth taking. He would call, and if he could summon courage for it, take her out to dinner. He wished he was dressed, but one cannot hope in life for everything. (He had belonged at Cambridge to a very distinguished set, who wore their worst clothes in good company on principle.) He thought of calling on Brading and borrowing some clothes, but as his father was said to be dying, the proceeding might not be timely. He made lively and complicated intrigues for a night's amusement during the short journey, his spirits rising all the time. He was behaving exactly like a man about town, and he would mention the business with excessive carelessness to the world at Glasswell the next morning.

As things turned out, he mentioned nothing whatever to anybody; all such opportunity was denied him. It was all puzzling and annoying in the extreme, and a simple proceeding on Violet's part, feminine certainly, but nevertheless ill-considered, turned all his plans topsy-turvy, and left him helpless and adrift.

Of course, everyone knows girls faint. If one has

the fortune never to have seen it occur in life, all the best authors have long since given them away. It is not unheard-of for fellows to faint, if you come to that, at school, during a particularly long chapel, after a particularly heavy meal. But that is different. Fellows want kicking for being such a nuisance, and startling their neighbours,—and one cannot exactly regard women's fainting like that. They are hardly in the same category. Yet ——

It is to be feared Charles regarded Violet's fainting, at this particular juncture, as a nuisance. We make his apologies. There is really much to be presented in his excuse, for he had been frightened, and that invariably produces a reaction. He was coming easily up the stairs, in the cheerful certainty, on the evidence of a small girl he had encountered below, that Miss Ashwin was at home. Arriving at the upper landing, he was just in time to hear a woman's cry of fright,—a tone that made him start in sympathy,—a crash of falling scissors and pins,—that most unequalled noise,—and then immediately afterwards, a sharp call for help. Neither of the voices were Violet's, which made the hero feel more awkward. He moved his legs after a moment and went forward, picturing every possible catastrophe, from suicide to spiders.

When he got inside the room, and past the curtain, he found confusion: pins, utensils, drapery, all

tossed about. A tall girl he presumed to be Miss Eccles, in barbarian garb of coloured silk, was apparently carrying Violet, who was apparently dead. This is quite sufficiently disturbing, as a spectacle, to the ideas; and a man may be allowed to stare a minute, without being made the object of violent recrimination on the living lady's part. As Charles contended later to Violet, he did everything he was told to do; and if he did bring cold cocoa in a jug instead of water, Miss Eccles need not have been so hasty in her language about it, because the jugs were both white, and absolutely identical in shape. He picked up a large quantity of pins for her while she was tending Violet, and he picked them very badly, for his hands were shaking; and when she shook off her magnificent robe, and threw it at him, he pricked his fingers with more pins stuck in the fabric, trying to fold it up. Finally, to his relief, Miss Eccles snatched it again, and made a bolster of it in two minutes for Violet's head.

"Won't it be creased?" said Charles thoughtfully.

"It's hers, at least her mother's," snapped Miss Eccles, "and anyhow, it will serve her right."

Violet's first faint words were to direct Alice not to snub poor Charles; and he thought it was high time indeed that somebody came to his rescue. Finding her living eyes on him, just as they had always

been, nonsense sprang instantly to his tongue in self-defence. But it was random nonsense,—nightmarish, rather. What he said was ——

“Then it is not for a hundred years.”

“Spindles?” said Violet, and her white lips quivered into a smile. “Charles, how nice you are,” she murmured.

Charles was relieved to hear he was nice; he did not feel so. He felt, somehow, that at least a hundred years had elapsed since he saw her last.

“You haven’t even been introduced,” said Violet. “Miss Eccles — Mr. Shovell. A pin is running into me, darling, if you would be so good. Ask him immediately if the Gentlemen won, and if so, how much.”

“I shan’t do anything of the sort,” snapped Alice.

“The Players won,” said Charles huskily.

“Miss Eccles will be delighted,” said Violet.

“Please tell her all about it while I wash my face.”

Thus matters were put upon a rather happier footing, and pretty soon all three were talking busily. It was exquisite relief, after all, that Violet, having been dead, could come to life so quickly, and speak in such a life-like manner. Also, it was characteristic of her cunning, according to Miss Eccles, that she should drop behind Miss Eccles’ back, and so out of her reach, during the arrangement of a shoulder-seam.

“The detestable thing is crooked now,” murmured Violet. “We had better commence with that, Alice, to-morrow.”

“I regard it as my business to dictate,” scolded Miss Eccles, “what we commence with, and otherwise. And that’s not one of your words, anyhow.”

“She is such a stickler,” said Violet. “She uses two dialects at least, Charles, but she never allows me on her ground. Everybody trespasses occasionally, tell her that.”

“They seem really to be friends,” thought Charles, still dazed; and he wished with strong resentment that Miss Eccles would put on her blouse. But she seemed to have forgotten all about it, and if Violet did not, he could not remind her. Of course she was agitated, and of course it was very hot in the room; and of course Mr. Shovell was dressed in faded flannel and not in cloth; but that was no excuse for her regarding him, as she evidently did, as a nonentity. Coming up to town he had been rather proud of that ancient warrior, his College blazer. Men had looked at him with respect,—but girls are so absurd. It was true, this girl’s bare white wrists and arms were most beautiful and distracting: yet in strength sufficient, as he had seen, to carry Violet half across the room.

He began to wonder, while he chattered nonsense wildly and persistently, if he had not better escape,

get out of the toils, and leave them together, as women on these occasions had better always be left. He also thought of going for a doctor, a thing which is often done, and which seemed to have occurred to neither.

Presently he summoned courage and proposed this step.

“Good gracious,” said Violet, “what an idea! Can’t you see I am progressing most favourably, and no earthly doctor would ——”

About that point there were quick steps without, she stopped, the door opened, and the earthly doctor appeared as already described, in a white shirt front, with a thick bar on his brow.

“You are at dinner at the Athenæum,” Violet addressed the apparition bitterly. “You can’t possibly be here. I had it on the best authority.”

“Whose?” said Claude.

“Somebody who never makes slips,” said Violet, “because he would be dismissed instantly if he did.”

“He seems to be fairly accurate,” said Claude. He dropped the drapery he was holding, and advanced to the couch. Putting his hand across her head to the further side, he swept back the drooping curtain of her hair, and touched the bruise she had been concealing.

“It does not hurt the least, darling,” said Violet, becoming soft and appealing. “Let it pass. You

know Miss Eccles, don't you? He's only a medical man, Alice, dear." For Miss Eccles, with a lovely colour in her face, had seized her black silk bodice, and was donning it hastily. Charles, seeing the proceeding, laid it all to the glamour of the other man's immaculate tailoring, and felt bitter and small.

"Fasten it for her," said Violet,—to her father apparently. "It fastens behind,—idiotic custom, isn't it? I ought to tell you, perhaps, I happened to be trying something on Miss Eccles lately, when she hit me with her elbow, rather hard. She is rather jerky and short-tempered to-day,—the heat. She has apologised, and I pass it over. Since then, I have been resting, talking to Mr. Shovell, who called. The canons of society demand that you should take his hand, Father, and let go at once of mine."

Dr. Ashwin did neither thing. While he held her hand in a certain fashion, far from what the canons require, he seemed to be observing the room. Violet had very little hope she had deceived him, but she kept a gallant front.

"Hot, isn't it?" she said in the languid society manner. "I hope you have not been stupidly overdoing it, Father. You look pale."

"What have you eaten to-day?" he asked. "I mean, biscuits and cocoa exclusively, or something more substantial?"

"You cannot possibly see inside that jug," said Violet, annoyed, "so don't pretend to. Your eyes have the same natural limitations as Mr. Weller's. Besides, Charles, who is close to it, will tell you it is soup. We did not go out to lunch to-day, owing to pressure. I sent a message to Mother about that,—perhaps it did not come your way. I was about to ask Charles, there, to take me out to dine."

"Were you?" said Charles, rather startled. Then he felt foolish for being surprised,—because he had meant, of course, to take her out to dinner, once.

"Of course. I thought my responsibilities were safe at the Athenæum. As it is, I supposed they have scratched the engagement, suddenly; and what I am to do with the present one,—goodness knows."

"You'll go home with your Papa," said Miss Eccles, in her full, leisured tone, "like a good girl; and have your dinner in company."

"That shows your ignorance of our ways, dear," said Violet. "The kitchenmaid is out,—Fanny is at a cinematograph,—Mason likewise. It is more than probable there is nothing eatable in the house: because, owing to his bewildering extravagance, I have prescribed economy on all of them. Really, Father, on thinking it over, it strikes me you could not do better than to have a little cocoa here comfortably with us."

"Doesn't she want slapping?" said Alice, with

the same cordial serenity to Dr. Ashwin. She at least was happy and her easy self again. He nodded to the question, but did not smile; indeed, he looked most drawn and anxious, far more than the occasion demanded.

"If you'll stand on your two feet, Pussy," he said, "I'll do the rest for you, dinner and all."

"Cook it, you mean? Can you? Oh do, darling, Mason would be so annoyed." She was laughing as she rose, but obviously leaning on him. "No, I won't be carried: I refuse point-blank. . . . Listen, Charles." She turned to him with a certain earnestness, her grey eyes very steady, still clinging to her father's arm. He heard her speech, and the sweet little dry familiar voice, in a dream.

"You are my two best friends, and have assisted me in extremity. Therefore you know one another well. I cannot go out to dinner, owing to this impediment,"—she squeezed the supporting arm,—“Therefore I depute you to take Alice. I depend on you utterly, Charles. She is young and unused to the ways of London. Give her a nice dinner at a good place, tell her all your silliest stories, and manage her adroitly if she tries to pay.” At this point, seeing Mr. Shovell's face, she broke into laughter. “Charles,” she cried, “you are in the cradle! Act better, at least, for Heaven's sake.” She dropped her brow an instant against Dr.

Ashwin's sleeve. "I frightened him," she murmured, to explain.

"Come along," said Claude with decision. "Give Miss Eccles the word to be managed, that is the simplest thing."

"Between you and me, Dr. Ashwin, I am, and always," said Alice. "But I've got to go home, deary: word of honour I have. Mum will be fussing dreadfully."

"I charge you, Charles, by all you hold most dear," said Violet solemnly. "She has naturally an excellent appetite, and has starved all day. Her mother is a polite convention,—rather overworked. Cocoa-soup is not really sustaining. Well, Father, I have moved nine steps; I am practising, and you must give me time. A little advice in his ear about restaurants would be more to the purpose than pinching me."

Having so directed him, she leant to Alice a moment: obviously pleading, speaking low.

"It's not a thing I ever do," said Alice wavering.

"I know you don't," pleaded Violet. "But we do, so allow for us. Give in to our rowdy habits, darling, just for once. A dinner once in a way is nothing. Even his clerical relations will not throw it up against you, for that I give you my word. And he's charming, really, if you don't sit on him too heavily. Of course ——" she whisked the words

out of Alice's mouth,— “ Mr. Shovell is my friend. But *our* sort of friendship can stand it. There! ”

“ Well,” said Alice, on a yielding breath. “ You've done me this time. I suppose I'll have to. So long as he doesn't pay.”

“ Oh, good gracious! ” said Violet, letting out a flash. “ Here,— where are you? ” She turned, seized her father in a managing fashion by the coat, and dived adroitly into an inner pocket. “ Ten, fourteen, sixteen, seventeen-and-six,” counted Violet, “ Will that be enough for two? Which restaurant have you told him? ” She shook the coat imperiously. “ And where, if it's a smart one, do you keep your gold? ”

“ That will suffice,” he replied. “ It's only sustaining to outraged nature, not smart the least.”

Violet poured the silver into Charles' hand. “ My commission,” she sweetly observed. “ Keep something out of it for yourself. Don't stay very late, because of her mother,— and take her home.” Then she looked at his eyes. “ Charles, you're not cross, are you? ” she said, low and swiftly. She thought in a practised flash of every probable scruple such a boy could have. “ Is it the blazer? Alice will not mind — she's not dressed.”

“ It's not the blazer,” he answered, gruffly rather, pocketed the money without counting it, and let her go without looking at her again.

He felt singularly guilty and miserable as he stood there, hearing her light footsteps retreat down the stairs; and it made things little better when Miss Eccles turned to him triumphantly.

“There’s not her equal in London,” she said, with unnecessary emphasis. “You are in luck, Mr. Shovell, if I may be allowed to say so without offence.”

This, by Miss Eccles’ standards, was no more than a courteous formula, when the friend of another was proffering attentions, but Charles received it ill, and had no answer. The world was turning over for poor Charles. He only knew, for the first time Alice turned her lovely long eyes upon him: and for the first and last time, as it seemed, on earth,—since heaven was near,—he had the sweet shock of her smile.

X

GROWING PAINS

CHARLES seldom, if ever, spent a more unhappy evening. So unversed he was in life, though he had sung and jested of love perpetually throughout his Cambridge day, that he hardly knew what was happening to him. He only knew he was apparently booked in advance by a devil the like of which he had never met or guessed, to behave idiotically. We shall have lost more time than we think, in the conscientious compilation of this history, if we have not suggested successfully that Charles was fond of himself. The first addition to this knowledge he had personally and painfully to make was, that he had never really been fond of anybody else.

This was due to nature partly, and partly to ill-fortune. He had begun life by fearing and hating his father,—a shadow almost too far back to recollect, but sufficient to leave a taint of suspiciousness behind it. For quite a considerable period he thought he loved his mother, and only awoke to the fact that he did not, when he began his quest for the romantic life at the age of seventeen. His mother,

in sheer anxiety lest he should follow in his father's steps, dragooned him rather; and, as she spoiled him in her fashion simultaneously as mothers will, he never saw her sacrifices. He was not really far removed from Alice in situation, the difference being that his weakness was congenital, and all he knew of virtue and strength of mind he owed to the maternal teaching. The contrast between boy and girl had been completed by the inexorable moulder, life. Owing to the singular education of our gentler youth, Charles had never, at the age of twenty-three, had to shift for himself. Tutors, advisers, relatives and friends had shifted for him, and he had sat quietly, chattered other men's philosophy, and criticised their proceedings. It needs but to be added that he had excelled at certain sports, and that a ring of cleverer men had admired him for his turn of mind. It may be sufficient commentary on these methods to mention that Alice, three years younger, was ten years ahead of him at least, at this time, upon the paths of life.

He learnt his lesson that evening at her hands; though she was rather silent, listening to what he had to say with ready kindness, and looking about her, with innocent wonder, at unaccustomed things. It was her beauty taught him, not her eloquence. It struck Charles almost with horror, that she would

not and could not care for him, he was so utterly beneath her. It needs but to mention this to show how she had carried on sight the intrenchments of his vanity and self-love. They were not very profound intrenchments really, it was only that the forces of the man's soul within were ungrown to proffer better defence. The girl would have pitied instantly, had she suspected half his misery; for Alice knew where the frontier between comedy and tragedy lay,—that had been one of her hardest lessons; and she would not have chaffed or dallied in a calamity such as this.

But, as it happened, she noticed nothing that night, or very little. It was absolutely the first chance of her life of seeing a little of the world of pleasure, and she was as delighted as a child, though as acute as a woman in her commentary. Claude Ashwin had directed them to one of the go-between eating-places north of the Strand, foreign in name, but borrowing in nature some excellent hints from the old London traditions. It was convenient to the theatres, and had been discovered temporarily by a certain immutably upper set, who piqued themselves on following the best, and being followed themselves by fashion as fashion would. Claude himself had been taken there by Lucas Warden, and it had amused him adequately, without preju-

dice to feeding him in perfection; for it was not yet sufficiently "in the swim" for the service or the cookery to grow careless.

Lucas Warden was dining there to-night, and Alice noticed him presently. He had already noticed Alice, but like the prudent old hand he was, had made no sign.

"Why," she said to Charles, innocently pleased to find a face she knew, "there is old Mr. Warden, Miss Ashwin's friend. She brought him to our place once to see Miss Lennox. I wonder if I ought to recognise him?"

"No," said Charles.

"Don't you think so? Do tell me why."

"Because you're dining with me, and he's alone," said Charles haughtily, as though popular canons of good taste could be left to explain the rest. He was trying this manner on Alice recklessly to see if it was of any use.

"Oh," said Alice, slightly mischievous. "But Miss Ashwin is here in the spirit, isn't she? We can pretend she is, anyhow. That makes four."

"Not at all," said Charles. "You must have mistaken her, really. Besides," he added, spurring himself furiously, "no one could tackle such a feed as this in the spirit, possibly. It can't be done."

"I'm eating most of it," Miss Eccles observed. "For all you've done, you could keep a spirit com-

pany." She added, pleased with her idea,— "Perhaps you are."

"What do you mean?" said Charles.

"Though lost to sight," said Alice, "to memory dear." She was again using one of the complimentary formulas of "friendship." Charles was, or at least must be supposed to be, thinking of Violet. Boy as he was, he coloured with profound irritation.

"Miss Eccles ——" he began.

"Well?" said Alice in the pause. "Don't you like teasing? Never mind. Some do and some don't according to my experience. Let's talk of something else."

"I wish I could," said the unfortunate Charles. He meant, of course, he wished he could talk of the thing that was battering at his soul's gates to be spoken. Alice laughed sweetly across the table, proving that she took his meaning the other way; that she thought it quite natural her charming little friend should hold possession of his thoughts and conversation,— to the exclusion even of politeness.

So they proceeded, misunderstanding one another, until a certain point when, spurred by wine, Charles said something furious, which Alice thought "common," and she stared at him a second, doubt growing visible in her eyes. Even then, she seized instant hold, with her sad experience, of the wine's agency to explain it; she did not blame him seriously, and,

at the worst, only suspected he was "light." The "light" man she had met and known; all her mother's prudish protection had not been able to keep him off her. No girl so indiscreetly beautiful as Alice Eccles could move daily about London, and not be accosted at times. She had fought her own battles, and her mother had never known. Except in that somewhat vague formula that "men do beat all," she had never once mentioned her encounters, far less boasted of them, even to Violet. Only, Charles saw what she knew, saw that it exceeded even his own earth-shaking discoveries that night, and he raged. She suspected him of infidelity,—of vulgarity, which is worse. She was ready armed, gallant, guarding the path up which he strove to step, whose entrance he could barely find. This is a form of innocence upon which men do not count,—this steadfast, smiling pessimism of youth. But it is an attitude for which they are responsible, all the same.

Then Mr. Warden, passing to the door, at a barely visible sign from Alice's head, came across to them; and therewith Charles' discomfiture was complete. She was charming, though serious, with the elderly man of the world, dealing at once with their common subject, Violet. Withal she was courteous as the highest lady could have been. She mentioned Charles by name, and the match to explain his

clothes. (It did not, but Alice in her ignorance of matches evidently thought it did.) To explain his presence with her, she said they were both "on the loose," and that Dr. Ashwin had sent them there. Mr. Warden's kindly gaze found Charles a school-boy, and passed him over. They were sitting, by Charles' choice, in a retired corner; but the mere fact that Mr. Warden stood there, still and courtly, in the unmistakable attitude of deference to woman, the knuckles of one fine hand resting upon their table-edge, made five or six other men look round,—and look again at every covert chance.

"I don't like this," said Alice after a time, quite easily. "There's a smarter lot of people coming now, and I'm not dressed up to that gang. Nor is Mr. Shovell, are you? Besides, I ought to be off, really and truly. Shall we be getting out?"

She looked at her escort, but Lucas Warden answered her.

"Does that dismiss me?" he said. "I thought, as an ancient and useful appurtenance, I was being encouraged. I see I was wrong, and you were merely kind. Can I be kind, then, in return? Can I drive you to any station, for instance?"

"Dear, no," said Alice. "I'm all right. I sleep inside the town, you know; a tram goes straight from the corner. It's Mr. Shovell who has trains to catch."

"The *coup de grâce*," said Lucas, enviably calm. "Mr. Shovell, may I drive you? We can but console one another."

Alice laughed,— he heard her laugh,— delighted at the badinage. That was the way, of course, Charles should have spoken, if only he could struggle from the toils so unfairly binding him, hand and foot and tongue. Lucas Warden did not know her, had manifestly even forgotten her name, for he avoided it; but he played his man's part with ease in entertaining and gratifying a lovely girl, no matter what the occasion.

Nor did he really give much thought to it,— lucky dog! A passing remark on her charm and friendliness, after leaving her, seemed enough to dismiss her quite comfortably from his mind. He was an affable old party, this Warden, and was evidently accustomed to being accepted on sight by younger men as philosopher and friend. He ferreted out Charles' connection with the Ashwins very soon, remembered Margery at once, and insisted, while composing a message for her, on walking at Charles' side to the corner. By some means or other this plan was extended, and he came all the way to the station, discussing things and persons who had become as far removed as planets behind driving clouds to Charles. They were there, of course: they glimmered now and then, but obscured and quite

useless to him. In the crisis he was in, he could think of nobody. His stepfather alone might conceivably be of use, but not yet, and not in any fashion he had the wit or spirit to plan out to-night. Mr. Gibbs had often loomed so, a distant rock to the wrecked or panic-stricken, but Charles did not know that. He did not want to go to Glasswell, he shunned the place; and Violet's silver, not nearly exhausted, was sufficient for a night at a hotel. Two it must be, indeed, since the morrow was Sunday, and so not Alice's working-day. He was at a stage of having lost all scruple as to such a use for Violet's money. All possessions, all positions, all privileges in life had for him but one object, that of keeping his body as near as possible to Alice's. Owing to the untimely intervention of the objectionable Warden, Charles had not been able to get her address. He had been putting that off to the last moment, and it was those dear last moments that Warden had snatched from him, and turned to his own purposes so competently. He could of course reach the address through Violet; and while Warden talked away at his side, he was trying insanely to invent how best he should do that.

Meanwhile, perhaps owing to Alice, perhaps to the wine, his tongue was behaving with unusual brilliance and dexterity, while discussing quite inessential things. Mr. Warden was, as undoubtedly,

drawing him out. He knew how to draw young fellows out, and this one suited him. Charles was rather of his own kind, fastidious and desultory, a *flâneur* along the paths of life; and Mr. Warden, himself in an optimistic after-dinner mood, thought he had not used his opportunities badly. His connection with the Ashwins was highly in his favour, and he evidently had a taste for literature. In addition, Charles' tongue informed his companion of his set prejudice against the tutorial profession and in that prejudice Mr. Warden sympathised most heartily. For his own part, he had in youth barely escaped it, and only by a lucky throw, lost in the herd of young men who, for want of better prompting, are driven that way. He began to think out other opportunities for such as Charles, and his own profession instantly occurred to him. The boy had wits, obviously, but not such as are readily exchangeable for gold and silver in the mart. He had taste, imagination, a power of expression which — as exemplified to-night — was unusual at his age. His faults were those that Wardens most naturally condone, his advantages such as they most promptly perceive. In short, Charles made a conquest, and of a very useful man.

Charles' luck that night had not really deserted him, had he known. But it was like the irony of fate that he should make his first step towards ma-

terial prosperity the same night that he lost all value and regard for it. It is true, he had never had much. He was frantic, feverish, and really for the moment he hated Warden. They had to go into the station together; but there, fortunately, the publisher, cheery to the last, bade him an easy good night. Charles threw a jest after him, and made him retort and laugh. Then he strolled to the board that posted trains, saw that one to Glasswell was still open to him, and looked swiftly and furtively over all the strollers on the platform, to be sure no acquaintance was among them. He was in luck once more, for there was none.

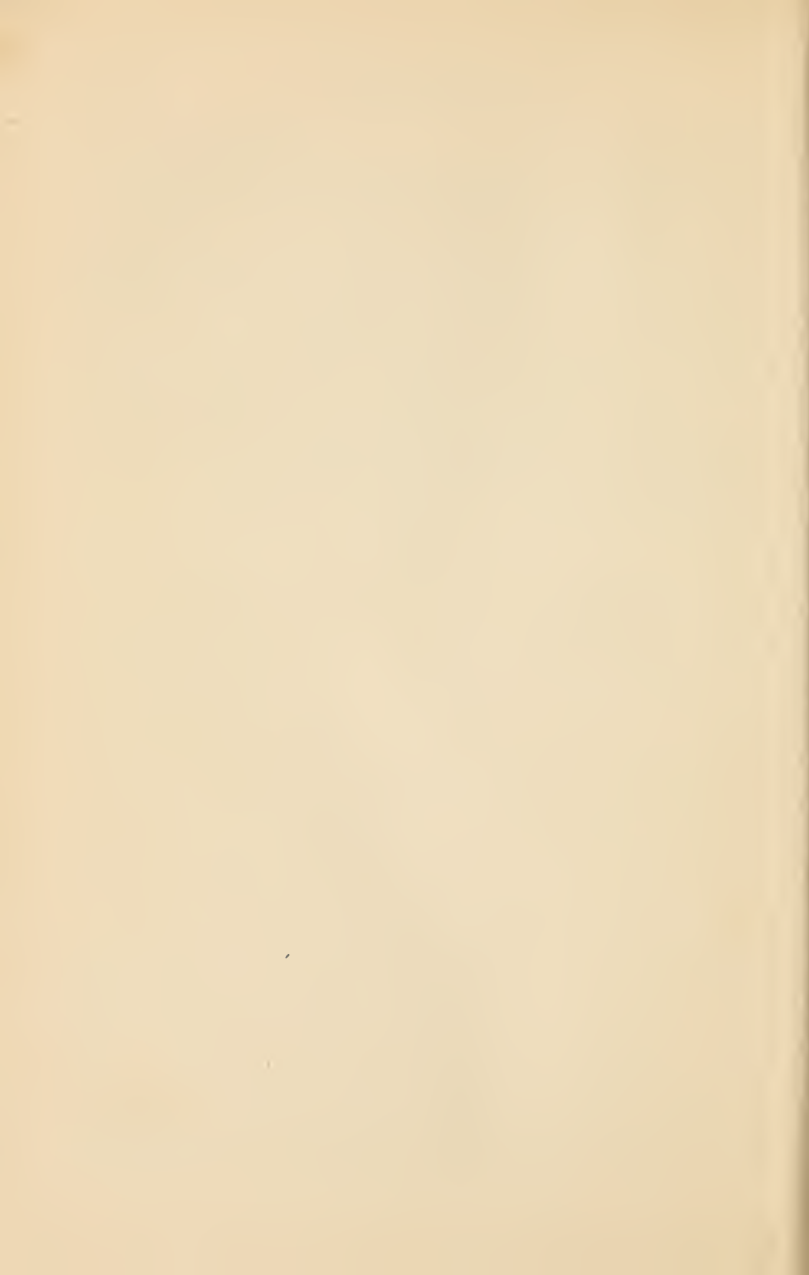
So, with a deep breath, having made certain that Mr. Warden had finally vanished from view, Mr. Shovell swung about, and made for the doors of the nearest hotel. On ordinary occasions he might have been shy, but he had already grown through that. If he was prompted by any idea at all in the proceeding, it was by the purely mechanical one of not losing any possible trail, that by any chance he might be holding. He was on one, at least, of the main routes to Battersea, and had perhaps two chances out of ten of intercepting his beloved on the Monday morning, as she made her way to her work. For those two chances anything might be risked; so he flung diffidence to the winds, and took a room at the hotel. He barely thought of his mother,

beyond purposing vaguely to send her a message the next day, to explain that Brading or some friend had detained him. That sort of thing was easily done. She would not — or Charles imagined she would not — be anxious. Charles, having known his father little, had never come near to realising the exact shade of her anxiety about him, even if he consciously interpreted her sharpness as anxiety at all. He could not stop to think of whom he victimised, or to split hairs of honour and delicacy, at such a moment. Brading, he thought, might be a good card to play, since owing to his situation and his father's danger, he was out of court, so to speak, and no longer in evidence at Glasswell. Nor could he afford much feeling for poor Robert, thus tragically separated from his love,— those sympathetic stirrings might come later, not now. At the point where he stood, buffeted by all the winds of passion, he was incapable of "nice feelings" at all. So he prepared quite calmly to couple Brading's name, if no better name occurred, to his projected lie.

It was not till he was actually in bed that he thought of the gardener Peacock, and the thought came with something of a shock. But it was all right, he told himself. Alice had scorned him, and Charles had every proof of his imperturbability and indifference. He began suddenly to wish that he had gone to Glasswell after all; for if Violet was

really right in her surmises,— and Violet was given to being right,— that fellow had the Eccles' address. The address still haunted Charles, his fixed idea. Why, if his and Violet's theory of the flower-stealing was correct, he had only to glance at the label of one of Peacock's boxes! Alas! how slow is the unpractised schemer to arrive at these simple things!

It need hardly be added that the unpractised schemer, deep in the maddening toils of a first love, forgot the existence of a London directory.



PART III
FOREIGN ADMINISTRATIONS

de me

I

THE DISENTANGLER

"IT's a bargain, then," said Miss Ashwin that same evening, handing back a little book. "You relax that absurd programme, which a Prometheus would know better than to attempt, and go to Dering Park like a nice gentleman, in a new coat. I will go down for one week to Glasswell, and spend the time profitably ——"

"I forbid you to be profitable," said Claude.

"Profitably, in disentangling Margery. Now you needn't pretend to know what I mean by that, Father, because you don't."

"I wasn't pretending," he said hastily. "I was not thinking of Margery for the moment, that is all."

"Then you are remiss, and a rude uncle. You know you admired Margery immensely. Now, let me see: will you kindly tell me *exactly* how Sir Rupert Brading is, professionally speaking?"

"Professionally speaking, he can hardly survive another operation, timed for a fortnight hence. What can that have ——"

"Margery will need my kind offices all ti ore.

Pity, in love, is half the battle, isn't it? Don't tell me the quotation, if you know one. I am devoting myself, *for once*, to facts."

The "*for once*" disarmed Dr. Ashwin. He was baulked of a reply. He did not really wish Violet to talk, in one of his capacities; but in the other, he loved her company. While these two instincts were at war within him, Violet entertained him assiduously. He had swept her home from Battersea, discarding the hired driver in order to take better care of her, and put her promptly to bed, buckling on his professional armour to divert her taunts about his fussiness. Violet had a beautiful room, draped and fitted according to her personal taste with vivid gem-like colouring, and full of unique objects she had collected, largely her father's gifts. She had no objection to being hostess there, she assured him, rather than in the rooms downstairs, especially as he very seldom paid her visits now. She also had, thanks to an inspiration of Alice's, a wonderful garment of thick white silk embroidered with apple blossom, which happened to be just the thing for a domestic party, such as this.

But the dinner remained the difficulty. She dared him, with all his wiles, to find a dinner in any corner of the house. She sat mocking with folded hands while Claude rang the bell, and waited hopefully upon the rug. When nothing happened, she laughed

at him, and advised him, if he was hungry, to go to the Athenæum, a place where the cooks stayed in. Personally, unless manna fell from heaven very soon, she thought she would go to sleep. She was delightfully drowsy, and he had made her deliciously comfortable, and she regretted to tell him he was not turning out so conversible as she had hoped.

Her father left her, undismayed, and went to the kitchen. There, having walked about a little, taking stock of an unfamiliar quarter of the house, he faced his cook, who had just come in from her outing, and whom his appearance scared so bitterly that she dropped the key. He picked up the key, and asked her with elaborate politeness if there was any food to be had conveniently at such an hour, or if he had better send out to the hotel. Dr. Ashwin's servants stood in wholesome awe of him and his terrific standard of efficiency, but his exactions did not breed ill-will. As for his daughter, a breath of her need was enough.

"He came down Himself," gasped Mason the cook to Florence the kitchenmaid, as they rushed about their premises. "Walking all over the place he was, telling me what to get and where to get it, and me with no breath at all to follow. Where he learnt the larder, unless Miss Violet expressly informed him, is more than I can say. Talk of keeping women in their place, it's men as'll soon want

interfering with, if the likes of him goes on. Not but what he knows what's good for the dear. He told me she was tired out, and sensible-like he got her into bed. I couldn't have done better than that myself. I told him I'd do my poor best, granted the short time at my disposal,—but he's that quick with his hands himself, and any duke you like to choose is less particular."

Florence the kitchenmaid, who had perhaps a limited number of dukes to choose from, shook her head. But she toiled with her fingers, and the pair produced trays of dainties for Violet in the shortest possible time.

"I wish I had believed in your occult talents," mused Violet aloud above the dainties, "and I would have asked poor Alice here. But I never really believe till it is too late."

"They will be all right where they are," said Claude shortly. "If Shovell does as I told him, that is."

"Don't you think she is absolutely beautiful?" said Violet.

"Well," he demurred. "Absolute beauty is a high saying. She is a pleasure to the eye, certainly. I've seldom seen a creature so well-formed."

Violet made a faint grimace. "Technical a trifle," she said. "Say something nicer than that."

"She seems fond of you," said Claude, touching

her hair. He avoided saying what, to him, was obvious, that the girl had knocked over poor young Shovell. He had an excellent unwillingness to intervene between boys and girls at the first stage of their stories, for all his bitterly-acquired knowledge. But he did wonder a little, as his eyes rested on the pale-faced girl below him, if Violet were to be foredoomed in life to unhappiness, like himself. He had seen her liking for young Shovell very well; her confidence in him was pretty, if ingenuous. He thought fate might spare such children, at least for the present; yet he had small faith left in fate, especially to-night, with the consciousness in the background of his mind perpetually, of Eveleen and that fellow together at Dering Park. He had known all day, in the stress of thought for others, that those black clouds were storing themselves for his first leisure. It was all he could do, for the girl's sake, to resist them now; and even so, it was only by a counteracting anxiety.

Claude supposed, since Arthur Gibbs had told him so, that he was over-anxious about Violet, but he schooled himself with reasoning in vain. She was not like other girls, so how could he be supposed to argue reassurance from the experience of other men? She was so near to him too, his authorship so evident, it increased the burden. He himself had handed her the terrible inheritance of intellect,—

terrible surely for women, who must pay the daily toll of feeling too,—and he doubted constantly, wretchedly, if he had handed her the strength necessary to sustain it. Arthur at Glasswell that Sunday had encouraged him to believe that the strength or self-support was in her, and it might be so. At least, strength or no, Claude did not intend to keep her by him a moment longer than he need. He had told Arthur so roundly, on that occasion. He had reasons in both his capacities for wishing her married, for he believed her health and happiness to lie that way.

Violet, who had long ceased dining, and was dreaming in her fashion too, startled him by speaking suddenly.

“Father dear,” she said, lifting her eyes to him, and laying her head back on the pillows glimmering in the dusk, “you are a very wise man. Do you think it is safe, ever, to meddle with other lives? To try for instance to drag people who are apart together? Can it ever really be done, with any profit?”

He turned, and walked away to the window where the late summer twilight was fading. Margaret had tried that: she had tried in his own case. But not to bring together,—the reverse.

“I think it is no use,” he said at last. “But try, Pussy, by all means. You are bound to do it well.”

“To fail brilliantly,” said Violet.

He nodded. That was precisely what Margaret had done. He had never, to this late day, resented, or forgotten, her interference. How sweet she had been, how earnest, and how valiantly alone! She had not summoned even Arthur, her trusted knight, to lend her countenance in a work which might, by one false word — he knew it well — have cleft her life apart from his finally. As it was, Eveleen had hated her, and he had loved without a shadow, with a new respect. Standing by the London window, he caught a glint of moonlight on the slates, the same moon that was shining on them down there, among the exquisite country sounds. Margaret had been his moon, bright even then with the crescent radiance. Now that the sun of his love was setting sulkily, that moon of early affection shone ever brighter, rising in the darkening sky. He did not try to word the image,— emotion had got ahead even of words, for his ingenious mind, tonight,— only it was there, all ready to be found.

He gathered himself with an effort, and walked back to the girl, seating himself quietly in the chair beside her bed.

“I am a fool, Puss,” he said, with youthful simplicity — so-called, for simplicity is invariably mature. “I have never learnt how to fail. I am inclined to say, you had better learn it young and get

it over. It's my misfortune — perhaps more misfortune than fault — that I never did."

Violet stretched out her fingers and took his hand.

"You simply can't," she declared. "I am sorry to doubt your word, dear, but I can't promise even a brilliant failure to such as you. You are always in the very middle of the target. Even in little things like this dinner, you do right instinctively. I thought you were wrong, I may confess it, when it appeared. I was dreadfully nervous for your credit, quite as much as for my own. But now, I feel so much better — it's quite ridiculous."

He remained stationary, a hand across his face. It might have been his sister speaking. He was haunted simply.

Violet began to talk, as though she knew that was what he needed. She told him stories, about Margery and others. He only began to listen by degrees — to the sense, that is: he loved the manner and the phrasing so much.

Of course one could not think much of Margery Gibbs when Violet was by, though Margery was his sister's own girl. She was not the least Margaret's girl really. Yet she was pretty and steady and trustful, and had got into a tangle, so it seemed. A gardener,— oh ridiculous! The girl had the pick of London and Cambridge, Robert Brading, at her beck and call. Violet was romantic and credulous, as

young girls are. Was that the kind of situation she was managing?

Then Violet spoke of his running over, or failing to run over, somebody,— the gardener again. And suddenly, he saw a face. The face of a man by the wayside,— the same, though beardless,— connected with an instant of ghastly tragedy, a crowd, a sordid clamour, sights and scents frequent in his own life, but nothing that Violet could or should even know. Was that the man — Margery's? What was the child dreaming of? What was this?

Claude awoke, for indeed his weariness had gained on him, and in the twilight of the airy chamber, the soft voice soothing him, he had been near to sleep. He caught himself up in a barely visible movement, and considered sharply.

Yes, to be sure: Gibbs' gardener. He had left it in Arthur's hands to judge. Young Brading also had written him a line; somewhere among the mass of his weekly correspondence, it had been handed him by his secretary, and he had replied. He had supposed a young detective following a scent,— he had not guessed a jealous lover. Yes, here was trouble, very possibly: Violet was right. Something could, and had better possibly, be done.

Violet saw him awaken out of his languor, and his eyes gather life again, and she was pleased.

" You like Mr. Brading, don't you, Father? " she

said artlessly. "It is silly of course of Margery, if true: but I have reason to believe it is a fact. My correspondents' inaccuracies cancel one another, you know, like fractions,—and facts emerge. If it is true,—do you suppose anything can be done about it?"

"Oh, certainly — yes," said Claude. His tone was brisk.

"That's more like it," Violet congratulated him. "You look quite clever again. Shall we conspire, in the matter, just a little? Do you enjoy conspiracy *à deux*? Perhaps you had better abandon Mother at Dering, and come to Glasswell after all."

"Oh, rubbish," he said. "Never use two where one will serve. Besides, I am obviously too old to be appropriate."

"You don't look awfully old," said Violet. "I daresay you could distract dear Margery's attention, if you tried."

"While you set your cap at what's-his-name? That's your idea of disentangling, is it? I won't have a thing to do with it, it's disreputable. Gang your own gait and don't disturb your parents."

"Should I have my 'dot' if I came to you engaged to him?" enquired Violet. "He is an entirely beautiful man. His name suggests Christina Rossetti,— 'peacocks with a hundred eyes.' I am sure you would like me to have that name. He is

also silent and strong, as Charles observed. In books I have always loved that special sort."

"And they always marry the heroine?"

"So they do. Is Margery the heroine — or am I? Look at me well,— an awful question. I'm sure I'm better dressed." She shook the white silk and apple blossom down her slim bare arm; her hand was holding him tightly all the time.

"You're sleepy," said her doctor-father definitely. "If you say another word, I will dethrone you both from heroineship, and put up that pretty girl across the river you showed me to-night."

"Oh *do*, Father! Say you will! You are an Angel of intelligence, really."

"Am I?" The Angel of intelligence began to put her pillows straight. He did not trouble much about her extravagance, except to mark how easily the high wind of excitement rose.

"Is that right?" he asked after a moment or two.

"Perfect," said Violet. "I must really have recourse to your services again, Dr. Ashwin, next time I have the vapours. Good night."

"Nothing further?" he insisted, glancing about him beneath a slightly furrowed brow. Perfection was the least, the very least, his daughter could be allowed.

"Oh well,— a kiss, of course," said she.

He half-started, turned, and bent to her, shyly

almost; and she caught him with her slender arms. It was a singular thing, worth noting, but Eveleen Ashwin disliked embracing in her presence, especially if Claude was a party concerned; and Violet frequently kissed him by stealth. She referred to the fact now, as he held her.

"Mother would despise us, wouldn't she?" she laughed. "I'm smaller, I suppose,— I can't do without it."

"Nor I," he answered just audibly. She did not seem to hear him,— she was thinking of his comfort still.

"Empty rooms, poor dear, and no billiards,— no girl to play to you even. Can't you telephone to Mr. Warden? Won't you go over to the Club?"

"No, I have letters to write," he said.

"Not duty ones, then: leave those for Mr. Ford."

"Not duty. A line to your mother, and half a line to Arthur Gibbs."

"To Uncle Arthur? Half a line more of love, then, from me. Two lines of letter, all told,— promise me no more."

"Nothing to Mother?" he suggested.

"Of course,— don't be absurd,— all the desirable things."

"Desirable!" he thought, in triumph almost at her accurate instinct. Even in his arms, she did not deceive him for an instant.

“I was teasing simply, darling,” he said. “That is enough: lie down.”

His “half-line” to Arthur Gibbs, written some twenty minutes later, ran as follows:

“DEAR ARTHUR,

“Would you rather fool another, or be fooled? According to your answer, I shall judge henceforth of your calling, and how you have spent your life. I omitted to insist that your gardener was rather an ill-regulated knave, while suggesting to your more charitable judgment he was an ass. Well, did you ever hear of Titania? I am informed love-in-idleness grows about your garden,—on the authority of my own flower, who should know. Heave it out, I advise you, for not even prospective graduates are safe in summer-time.

“Will you have Violet for a fortnight from Tuesday next? She is asked to Dering along with us, but I will not take her there. I throw myself on Mrs. Gibbs’ clemency instead. Violet, who sends her love to you, is not sick, only sensational; and girls and greenhorns are the safest company. No offence whatever to Mr. Charles.”

The Reverend Mr. Gibbs replied in kind, after some twenty-four hours impressive pause.

“CLAUDE,” he preluded sternly,

“You are reckless by nature, and frivolous by education, and no hard experience seems to help you. You have risked our friendship, which I value considerably, on one smart throw; and I regret to tell you you have won the stakes. As it is, I am not even going to quarrel with you, I am too depressed. How, with my practice in your pestilent obscurantist methods, I failed originally to guess, I can only leave your impudence to supply. Probably you patted my hobby in the intervals of suggesting scandal to his rider’s nobler ear.

“I simply don’t know what to do with Margery, and I dread, for her, the results of chucking the man. I have talked to both all I know, and both baffle me, especially he. Oh, deuce take it, why couldn’t you tell a fellow before it happened? I’m getting old, and never was a serpent, or a society man. Henrietta, who noticed nothing, is especially down on me, and it is true I knew Margery before she did. Maud, of course, has been suffering in silence, and will hardly speak to me even now. How you discovered — I suppose along with Satan, who was certainly concerned. I passionately refuse to believe that you are in the confidence, to that extent, of a damsel of eighteen. I have myself a girl of eighteen, and if you assert anything of the kind, you lie.

“My blessing on the child, and send her quickly. Her uncle pins his faith to her. Margery wants

shaking, and her sister won't, and I daren't, and it's against Henrietta's principles. Violet alone can do it. Indeed, I doubt she has been at the work already: for when I said she was coming, Maid Margery melted into tears."

II

LOVE IN IDLENESS

DR. ASHWIN did not go down to Dering, for on the eve of departure a frantic telegram from Lady Brading summoned him. But Violet did go down to Glasswell, and Margery, who had been shrinking from all society, met her at the station.

It is not our intention to describe what the two girls said to one another, in the somewhat prolonged interval before the dog-cart reached the house. The pony, for lack of any encouragement from Margery's lazy whip, walked at his own pace, and followed his own erratic course up the hilly winding road, jerking the two girls every time he turned. A gusty breeze blew Violet's hair about unheeded. She talked the most, and had, for a large part of the way, a hand upon her cousin's wrist. Margery did not cry, but her pretty face looked drawn and lifeless.

She admitted she had heard from Robert, though she would not show Violet the letter, and Violet did not ask to see it. She admitted, on her cousin's suggestion, that she was very sorry for him. One could not be less than that, towards a man who was

losing by slow but agonising degrees a wise and open-handed father, whose mother was worn to shreds by anxiety, and literally half-crazed by grief. The Bradings were an affectionate and closely-knit family, and it was certainly very hard on Bob.

But Margery could not feel rightly about it, barely even as her up-bringing and conscientious principles dictated. Maud was a better girl than she was, she told Violet, and felt things more deeply, by far. She wished,—she did wish quite wildly,—that Mr. Brading would think of Maud, or anybody else, and forget about her. She was impatient with everyone, in gusts. She was very miserable, very remorseful for worrying Papa, but she could not feel otherwise than she did. She supposed God had decreed it,—and she left it there.

Violet supposed nothing of the sort, but she did not say so. She soothed Margery by pretty talk of other things. She admired the woodland views and vistas,—so much preferable from a friendly pony-cart, rather than from a flustering one. She enquired if Margery had been painting much, and received a curt negative for answer. She regretted it, for she personally hankered after a certain view of Glasswell village from the home field,—and her birthday was coming quite soon. Apropos, would Margery come for her birthday party?—Mother had said she might have one. Margery, still aloof, had an

idea the Newnham rules were rather strict. Violet was pained to hear it, but had an immutable conviction that a note from Father to the Principal would adjust things, as soon as it became essential, according to her taste.

At the house, she was surprised to hear that Charles was away. Margery had never mentioned that! It was evidently news to Violet, though the Gibbs family had presumed she must be in the secret, and had indeed been awaiting enlightenment. Charles, it seemed, had been away since Saturday, — the Players' match. Mrs. Gibbs, concealing her prompt alarm, had told everybody that a friend had taken him home after the match, and he had slept where he dined, regardless of everybody's convenience, as usual. Violet's brows lifted, and her eyes turned absent, while they talked. It occurred to her at once that Charles had had some plot in mind when he sought her that evening at the studio. He had behaved and looked at her so oddly, almost with reproach, and she had been too dazed at the time to account for it. He had expected her co-operation in the game, no doubt, and, when she fainted instead, had been naturally disgusted with her lack of spirit. Looking back, Violet decided that, headache and such details notwithstanding, she had been rather unfeeling to poor Charles. She only trusted Alice had been kinder, but one could

not be sure. Alice had not had a promising appearance that night of suffering casual young gentlemen gladly. Alice was a cranky girl, at times.

All this Violet thought, but she kept her counsel; for evidently, in his own household, all was not well on the subject of Charles. Maud told her in private, his note to Mamma had been strange. Mamma thought he was behaving strangely, and even before his departure they had noticed something strange in Charles. The word "strange" was as far as Maud, at least, tried to get in the matter; but she was clearly deep in her stepmother's confidence, and Violet thought her sympathy very beautiful, even if the wording of it lacked variety. Personally, being a mere outsider, she only put in a word or two to cheer Mrs. Gibbs, who was inclined to secret worry, as Violet had long since regretfully perceived.

"I am sure he will do nothing silly," said Violet definitely. "It's only some fine adventure, you know, which will fizzle out like a firework quite soon. And he will have the most beautiful story about it, for you and the rest of us, when he comes home."

Mrs. Gibbs could not but admit this showed real knowledge of Charles; and, though the assurance came from such an unauthenticated quarter, it consoled her curiously.

It occurred to Margery, the following afternoon, to go down into the field to paint, when she had spent some time getting her palettes into order, for the apparatus had suffered from its sudden and complete neglect. Consequently, having helped her off, Miss Ashwin was at a loose end. She talked nicely in the drawing-room for a period, and then, having informed Maud and her aunt that they were horribly busy, wandered out upon the lawn.

It was a pleasant day, and Uncle Arthur's garden was looking beautiful. Several improvements, of which he had spoken to Violet as mere projects at their last encounter, had become actualities in the course of the summer. She sought for some time, wandering from point to point and taking observations, to explain the difference in the place since May; for of course she would sooner or later have to report an opinion to the proprietor, and it was better to prepare words for it.

She came to the conclusion finally, that whereas it had then been an amateurish garden with a professional finish, it was now a professional garden with a personal note. She liked the personal note immensely while admiring the immaculate order and prosperity of the whole parterre. She had no idea, being city-born, how Uncle Arthur and clever Peacock did it,—it seemed a pity someone like Charles was not at her side to explain. Charles had

explained various interesting matters to her before, because he was a person given to sitting about the world and noting details. Now Violet always intended to improve her mind by this process,—but when it should have begun, she generally forgot, and dreamed. That was a tiresome inheritance from the Ashwin stock that she could not, like “the doctor,” learn to overcome. She trusted to do so, in time.

Her white dress flashed to and fro for some time about the walks in sight of the house, and Maud told her mother in the drawing-room that Violet was probably composing something, and need not be bothered about by anybody, because Maud knew the signs. So Mrs. Gibbs did not bother, and went out with a basket containing the Rector’s cast-off boots, to see a family in the village. Maud, on her departure, slunk instantly to the kitchen, where her cake-making talents were of value; and the flash of Violet’s skirt disappeared simultaneously from the flowered parterre, and was lost behind the laurel hedges of the kitchen-garden. She thought it very probable she should find Peacock working there.

She judged correctly, and had not to seek long. Peacock, on a short ladder, was correcting an overpowering growth of creeper against the low roof of his own cottage. It was evidently most artistic and entrancing work, and he was deeply engrossed by it. Violet, at her first observation of his pro-

ceedings, thought she perceived that nature must be cajoled by gardeners, and coaxed to believe that she had done it all herself when the creepers and rose trees took an especially elegant shape. There must be no force anywhere, only flattery: because nature was a woman, perhaps. That was all very interesting indeed,—but Peacock was more so.

She had looked through all Margery's sketches, of course, and been properly impressed, by artist and model equally. Now, especially when he first perceived her, and leant a hand on an upper window-ledge, in a most dangerous pose, to turn and take her in, she thought she had seldom seen a more heroic figure. But for the most complete strength and physical poise, that ladder must necessarily have come crashing down, and Mr. Peacock's life and labours been summarily ended. It did not, and the gardener turned to his work again.

"How beautiful your cottage looks," said Violet.

"Yes, miss," said Peacock.

That was extraordinarily nice of him, to exhibit no shame in admitting gratification in the ownership of a beautiful object, which was largely his own production. It signified various latent virtues, such as dignity, self-respect, an open mind and a sense of beauty, to Violet's trained perceptions. The terseness of its expression was its final charm. Violet

hardly wondered, as she prepared her next move, that poor Margery had been attracted.

"I wonder if you found my card," she said, approaching a little, though she eyed the ladder anxiously, "when I and Mr. Shovell called before. It is some time since, but you may remember. He brought me here, because I did so want to see and congratulate you."

"Thank you, miss," said Peacock,—the obvious answer, exacted by the highest social standards, and beautifully spoken. His voice was nice, rather subdued, his consonants especially clear and distinct.

"Now you are still more to be congratulated," said Violet, "for I hear from Mr. Gibbs that one of your beautiful roses, and several of the peas, got a prize."

"Three, miss," said Peacock.

"Really?" said Violet. "That is better still." She felt her own remark was commonplace. Really, she thought, she must rub up her conversation, if she was not to be beaten in open field by this truly striking man. Unluckily, she knew so little about his profession herself,—but then ladies trained on the Riviera, and personally invited by Earls, know how to overcome that difficulty.

"The large shell-coloured rose," said Violet, "with the little pearly drops between the petals,

against the wall by the stable, strikes me as specially beautiful. Was that the prize one, I wonder?"

"No, miss," said Peacock. Well, it was no wonder that professionals should kick occasionally, at the pretentious and silly observations of the amateur. She felt she must be especially courteous and attentive, to make up. There was the motor incident, for example,—a word in season could well be said as to that.

"I ought to tell you," said Violet, "how deeply I regret my father — Dr. Ashwin's behaviour to you — oh!"

She could not avoid the exclamation, and shrank back; for the ladder seemed in imminent danger of collapsing. Peacock caught the coping and saved himself, trampling it sedulously straight. He did not turn, though, or excuse himself to the lady.

"I'm very sorry," said Violet, rather low and breathless, "and I hate to interrupt you in your work; but it makes me too nervous to talk while you stand up there. Would you terribly mind, I wonder, coming down?"

Peacock, unheeding her, continued to work imperturbably. He might not have heard her request,—possibly did not, for he had begun to snip with some squeaky shears. Miss Ashwin never made a request to a gentleman twice. She waited for the next pause in the clipping,—she had to wait some

time, with her teeth on edge,— and then she said: “ Mr. Peacock! ”

He could not pretend that the soft staccato voice was not bound to reach him, so he turned his head a little, sufficient to show that he heard.

“ Are you angry with us? ” said Violet. “ Perhaps it startled you, that day.”

There was the faintest movement in the man’s shoulders, resembling a shrug, for answer. He took up the shears again. The situation was, socially speaking, trying in the extreme, as well as completely unexpected. He had begun with such delightful and satisfactory responsiveness, according to Violet’s skilled reading, that it was the more disappointing. If only Charles were there!

“ Is it Father you are angry with? ” said Violet. “ Father is rather heedless, especially when he is in a hurry, and he always expects other people to be as quick as he is. But he meant no harm.”

She heard a slight mutter, and gave it the best attainable interpretation.

“ Please don’t apologise,” she said. “ It was entirely our fault. I always resent it fearfully when people give me shocks —— ”

It could not surely have been intentional, but he moved his feet again, and the ladder, with horrid suddenness, swung sidelong into the creeper, which fortunately stayed it up, and prevented it from

dashing to the earth in Violet's direction. At the same moment Peacock spurned the ladder, and with a remarkable exhibition of strength, grace and agility, swarmed upon the roof. When Violet opened her eyes, and unclenched the little fists she had gripped in panic at her breast, he was actually upon the roof, half kneeling, though turned away.

"But I don't bear malice," she finished, in her very sweetest manner, approaching and looking up at him, "when the shock is safely past."

It was as she stood there, quite close, though below him, awaiting the apology any gentleman, man or gardener, high or low, would have offered to such as she, that he rose to his feet, turned, and she saw him fully, for he faced her,—a gallant shape of manhood, his body backed against the mossy roof, his head and shoulders against the sky. She noticed the shoulders shaking, thought he had been alarmed as well, and did not, for an instant, believe the evidence of her eyes.

He was laughing!

Violet could not declare later why that laughter frightened her, but it did. It was like the laughter of an impish, heartless boy,—not that of a man grown and trained to serious ways of life. Abel Peacock saw her face beneath him turn white and grave, and, after a second's pause, her slight figure turn and withdraw in the direction of the shrubbery

that shrouded the cottage to the further side. He watched her white dress vanish: then he stopped laughing, sat down upon the coping of the roof, and considered deep and bitterly.

III

NOTES

VIOLET missed Charles very badly as she thought over Peacock's behaviour; though she was too proud, after the first, to wonder openly where he was. As it chanced, though, the next morning she was herself able to offer the anxious circle some news of him, though sufficiently vague and indirect, for she had a letter from Mr. Warden.

The letter, since she had left London but eight-and-forty hours before, was ridiculously long and closely written; and Violet, poring over its contents before lunch in the garden, appeared to find it enthralling. Mr. Gibbs at the lunch-table teased her busily on the subject of her beaux, but got nothing of much value to appease the general curiosity.

"He often writes to me," she said, "and always volumes. He probably hopes I shall publish them twenty years hence, when he is safely dead; but if I do, I shall have to snip out whole paragraphs, for they absolutely bristle with personalities."

"For instance," said Mr. Gibbs, settling comfortably.

"For instance,—he met my friend Alice at a restaurant, and he *says* she fell in love with him at first sight. Now knowing Mr. Warden's ways I am aware that means he was rather dangerously attracted, and probably teased her with attentions. But nobody could know that, could they? — without a note."

"A few more notes on the document in hand," said Mr. Gibbs, glancing about him, "would be acceptable to the Public."

"I will append one," said Violet, "in the sanctity of your study, after lunch. Do you mind if I do?"

"I smoke in my study," said Mr. Gibbs.

"Well, I have no objection to a cigarette. I have never dared to in Alice's company, though often at a critical juncture, such as a fitting, I have simply ached for it."

"Your aunt is sorry to hear this, Violet," said Mr. Gibbs, striving for the dignity of his cloth.

"She has done as much herself before now," said Violet, "when Charles worried her for subscriptions to things at school. She told me so while we were unpacking." She smiled down the table to Mrs. Gibbs.

"She never told *me*," said the Rector severely.

"Oh, good heavens!" said Violet, dropping back. "I have violated confidence. I quite thought by this time you would have got at everything. It can't matter, though," she added, bethinking herself,

"because she gave it up two years later for Charles' sake."

"Does your mother smoke, Violet?" said Mrs. Gibbs, just for the sake of saying something.

"Really, I hardly know," said Violet. "I can't imagine she can need it. What do you say?" She glanced lightly at her uncle, who bit his lip. Her clear cold tone about her mother invariably went to the Rector's heart: it seemed to him so pitiful, and marked such a steady attitude of disdain. He would have stopped his wife, but she was still at the stage of curiosity about the child.

"What is that place like your father mentioned," she enquired, "Dering Park?"

Violet blushed visibly, but hardly hesitated.

"It is a beautiful old place," she said, slowly, "full of beautiful new people. The Derings never want them, but they come."

"How can they come without an invitation?" said innocent Maud.

Violet did not answer directly. "Mother got one," she confided privately for her uncle's ear. "Father congratulated her solemnly on the occasion. It's a record, really, only unfortunately the other people will never know."

"Was she uplifted?" said Mr. Gibbs, adopting the same tone of exaggerated confidence.

"Well," said Violet, "I watched hard for the

symptoms. But I saw nothing, and Father's secretary thought she was going to refuse."

"Marvellous woman," said Mr. Gibbs, shaking his head. "She will certainly go far. But what has the secretary got to do with it?"

"Oh," said Violet, "he answers nearly all her letters that Father doesn't, you know. When Father isn't there, Mother often uses him. He is a very amenable person, Mr. Ford."

The Rector's expressive eye just caught his wife's, filled with a sublime horror. In future they avoided the subject of Eveleen and her amenable surroundings with some care. Violet, always strained to combine accuracy with delicacy on the subject, was grateful to them.

She was much more comfortable with Mr. Gibbs, alone, in the study after lunch. She was still far from well, and easily tired, and she settled gratefully into the deep leather chair he advanced for her accommodation.

"Dear Uncle Arthur," she said, when he kissed her in passing to his own. "This is the first time we have had a fair chance, isn't it? I hope you are really at liberty, this time, and not just bearing with me."

"I can bear with you, my dear," he assured her quietly. "You look perfectly in place."

"Do you think so?" said Violet, answering the

allusion, not the words. "Father does too. But she was much more really beautiful, wasn't she?"

"No," said the Rector. "None of you are really beautiful. You all have an elvish strain. Moonlight elves," he added pensively.

She was silent for a period, thinking.

"It's not hopeless," she said at last. "Margery's side, I mean. I have come to that conclusion."

"Thank God," said the Rector, without profanity. Then she waited again for a time.

"The man's extraordinary," she said, frowning. "You would say he dreads and hates me,—no, do not interrupt." She stretched a hand. "I have done nothing to him but try to talk a little. There must be more in it, Uncle Arthur. My informants have left out something."

"If your informant was your father," said the Rector, "he probably has."

Violet shook her head. "Father was useless utterly. Though of course I guessed he had a hand in it, that night he wrote to you."

"He was a principal in it," said Mr. Gibbs. "But I know all the story. The man really is not fitted for my daughter, I can say it without scruple or snobbishness. He is a trifle ill-balanced, I believe,—or rather, Ashwin believes, who must know best. There is certain evidence for it."

Violet still frowned at him. "Oh, I hope not,"

she breathed. "You see, I wish him to marry somebody — not Margery — very much. He was once very nearly engaged to her. Shall I tell you all I know, Uncle Arthur? I will not ask for yours."

"No," said the Rector, after a minute of reflection. "We will share."

"Oh!" Violet beamed at him. "One for the doctor, that is, isn't it? I will tell him that when I write." Then she grew serious again. "It is my dear friend, Miss Eccles, who is in question," she said. "I have simply not dared, so far, to mention her to Peacock, because she was the unconscious origin of the trouble before."

"Do not mention it then, I charge you, my child," said the Rector, moving to her side. "I thank Heaven you have not tried, at least alone. I could never forgive myself if you suffered."

"*Entendu*," said Violet, and passed him her hand. "But why does he dislike me? I tried to be nice about his flowers, and he really cares for them."

"The man's a born horticulturist,—Heaven-made," said Mr. Gibbs, gazing upon his precious garden with sad eyes, as he held her fingers. "His head is level enough in his work." Then he looked down at her. "He connects your name," he explained, "with his disgrace. He had hoped to escape all connection with old history, by coming here. He

suspects probably that you are in the secret. It's enough to exasperate anybody," added the Rector pensively, "such a bit of rank bad luck as meeting you. I see that."

Violet gazed at him. "Did he assassinate anybody?" she said with her charming dryness. "Tell me the worst."

So Mr. Gibbs told her, watching his words, and she listened, her widened eyes fixed sidelong on his face. The shock had been broken already, of course, by Alice's hints, and her own conjectures; but her head collapsed into her hands before the end. She did not attempt to conceal her dazed horror at the complication. She only emerged from her hands to admit, with a frank look at her uncle, that it was quite too much for her.

"I might have known," she added, "if you and Father both stuck, I could not add much to it. How appalling,—and sad. Oh dear!"

"Don't give way," said the Rector, half laughing and half anxious. "There is always the woman's contribution, you know, the widow's mite, which neither Father nor I can supply. What offers now, my lady,—come!"

"There's only one thing I can offer," said Violet, after prolonged thought. "It is this—he can't possibly *marry* anyone but Alice, can he?"

"I trust not. But why?"

“Why, it’s against reason,” said Violet pettishly. “Kill yourself for one girl and marry another? He must be philandering with Margery simply out of bravado, and to make his own girl jealous. The crudest sort of savage has brains enough for that.”

“Humph,” said Mr. Gibbs. He had got the woman’s contribution certainly. It seemed to hold water too, on investigation, though startling from such a quarter. He set his lips oddly, and looked upon his niece.

“Since when have you understood the crudest sort of savage, Miss Violet?” he said.

“Oh, lately,” said Violet, faintly blushing. “Study of Mr. Peacock helps, of course. But I had not expected that part of the work, you know. I had hoped to leave that to Charles.” Still blushing, she lifted her eyes to Mr. Gibbs. “I do want Charles’ assistance, really. I wish I knew where he was. If you do find out, I wish you would tell him that I miss him dreadfully,—at every turn. I don’t know why — you will not understand — but I had especially counted on his assistance in this undertaking.”

“An excellent courage,” thought the Rector. “But they all have that. You value Charles,” he said thoughtfully, aloud. “Do you think, Violet, we undervalue him?”

“No, no, I believe you do not. As for her — for

Aunt Henrietta — I shall have to see.” She laid her fingers carelessly to her cheek, produced a letter, and unfolded it. Then she rose suddenly,— as though on springs. “No, I must get up,” she said at his protest. “I must sit at a table to show you. The other was sentiment and sympathy, wasn’t it? This part is Business. Wait.”

He watched her, while she seated herself with dainty precision, and spread out two sheets of her long letter before her. He wondered if she were going to tell him that she and Charles were engaged. He was quite prepared, with the humiliation of his recent shock, for that. Her tenderness towards the boy was undoubted, for he had marked the quality of that blush. It was the loveliest kind,— the earliest. He had suspected as much before, yet he hardly thought she was aware herself at present. All the Rector’s mind was set on making things easier for her, and not seeking to force nature’s own sweet ways.

“What is it, this mighty matter?” he enquired, putting an arm about her as she sat. “Business is scarcely your province, young lady, I think.”

“You are wrong, then,” said Violet haughtily. “My own business at Battersea is spreading. We have taken an extra room, and Father has audited our Balance-sheet. He says we are solid,— there! Now perhaps you will attend to me, about the

matter of Charles. . . . You see, my friend Mr. Warden has a vacancy,—he gives me all the details here. He has met Charles and approved him. He thinks he could establish him in life, if he is willing,—and you (plural you) — and I.”

“Singular you?” said Mr. Gibbs.

“I am afraid,” said Violet, “Aunt Henrietta will think us rather foolish, but Mr. Warden demands my recommendation for Charles. He exacts it. He says he has his reasons. What he means by that I don’t suggest, except to say he is a sentimental old gentleman. I had already mentioned the document needed notes. . . . Uncle Arthur, that is not Business, really!”

“It was merely a note,” said Mr. Gibbs.

“Will you read it, and tell me whether, judging by your knowledge of Charles’ mother, she will reject it with contumely, or otherwise? I hardly dared approach her, till I had approached you first.”

Mr. Gibbs took the letter-pages from her hands, and read them. Till he read, he had barely taken it seriously, but he saw that it was serious enough. It was also evidently written for other eyes than Violet’s, and very concisely and cautiously expressed. In his many musings on the subject, he had even arrived at the consideration of exactly this kind of post, as the ideal for his vacillating young dog of a

stepson. It was really a Heaven-sent opportunity. He could picture his wife's excitement and relief.

"Of course I don't follow all he means about the money," said Violet. "I know Father had to make a silver path for me: so I have no doubt somebody would have to make a gold one for Charles — since men are more expensive. Who, I cannot imagine — unless you. Have the peas paid you well, this season, Uncle Arthur?"

They chaffed over that a little more, and then Violet returned to her large chair again: for her uncle evidently meant to keep the letter for the moment.

"And you can recommend him?" he said presently, from a distance. "That is clearly an essential as you say."

"Confidently," said Violet. "Charles is just the kind of person Mr. Warden needs about. He is much the same type, you know. When Charles has stopped being a baby, he will become a delightful old man."

"Nothing between?" said the Rector.

"Nothing, I fear. A first and second childhood, that is all."

Mr. Gibbs walked about a little more, folding the sheets up very small while he reflected. Then he threw them at Violet, and said:

"Go and talk to your aunt. It will take a load

from her mind if you bring it off. I had intended to give him two hundred a year, the same as his sisters will have, from Christmas next. An advance presents no difficulty, and he has something of his own. Get along with you: and mention that."

"Must I go?" said Violet. "Between ourselves, I am still rather nervous of your wife at intervals. It is stupid, but — it is an interval now. . . . Don't you think, if I wait a little, the chances are she will come in here?"

"The chances may be," said he half smiling. In these gusts of shyness, he thought, she was so like Claude,— that young Claude he had once known.

"Stay where you are then, and don't chatter," he directed her. "Because I am going to haul out several strong boxes, in order to revise my will."

"You can't without a lawyer," said Violet, shutting her eyes. "However, never mind. I suppose you are like Father in trying, with an enormous waste of labour, to dispense with the professional, who exists for the sole purpose of helping you."

Her voice was drowsy, and her uncle told her to go to sleep. She did sleep intermittently, thinking now about Peacock, now about Margery, and now about Charles. Mr. Gibbs nearly forgot her, since her slight form was obscured by the spreading back of the enormous chair: nearly forgot, but not completely. There was a certain presence in the room

which he never felt unless she or Claude were about. It was an inspiring presence, and favourable to good work, so he worked very hard at his various occupations for two hours at least.

Then his wife — his present wife — startled him by entering suddenly. Her movements were always breezy, of the disturbing quality, for she had been used to stimulating her world, even by her passage through it. She was holding a letter-sheet.

“Arthur,” she said, in a tone familiar to his ears of suppressed and sharp-edged worry. “I am afraid there is no doubt of it. Lois ought to have taken my advice at once, and got rid of that girl. She is at the bottom of the mischief. Charles ——”

“Henrietta!” He inserted her name, not loud, but keenly. She started, stopped, and turned. Violet was gazing at them. The dart had sped true through the twilight veil of slumber that had enclosed her. Horror, the sheer panic of a woodland creature entrapped, was in her eyes. A minute passed, a miserable minute for the Rector, and yet more so for his wife, who had been perfectly unaware of the girl’s presence in the room. Then Mrs. Gibbs opened her mouth and made a movement: but Miss Ashwin was before her. She arose, springing neatly erect in her manner, and blinking the sleep from her eyes, came across.

“Oh, Aunt Henrietta,” she said, in her sweetest

drawing-room intonation. "I *am* so sorry about it. I *hope* it is not true. Poor Charles!"

"Catch her," said Mr. Gibbs: but it was too late, for the "elf" appeared. She fled like a spirit from the room, and he sank, with a slight groan, into his chair again.

"Oh, Arthur," said Mrs. Gibbs, "how unfortunate! Of course, I thought you were alone."

"Don't apologise, my dear," he answered. "I was to blame as well. I could have stopped you sooner if I had had any sense. My senses were wandering as usual. Good heavens!"

"I had no notion," she said, aggrieved, "you would have kept her all this time."

"It was partly to tell you something she stayed, — some news. She was waiting for you to come — the blessing." His brow was in his hand. His wife saw his distress, but still thought only of protestation and self-defence.

"I should never have worded it like that," she insisted. "Of course I know she cares for her."

"And him," said the Rector. "She loves him. It was a double stroke."

"What?" said Mrs. Gibbs, struck helpless. "Cares for *Charles*? Violet? — You don't say so!"

IV

EXIT PEACOCK

THE evidence on which Mrs. Gibbs judged her son was a very hasty scrambled letter from a hotel address. It said several things, among others that life was not worth living, and he was unable to write to Miss Ashwin. It also said he could by no means come home until he knew his fate, that his whole happiness for life was in question, and that his mother was not to be anxious about him. The present address would not find him after the following day, so she was not to attempt to communicate, far less to see him, or send him money. She was never to send him money again, as he intended henceforth to live on his means, and work. He wished her to send a card to a certain post office, containing two addresses,—unspeakably important. One was that of a former German tutor of his in the metropolis, the other the present address of that dressmaker woman Miss Lennox. The people at her place at Battersea, said Charles, did not seem to know it, though he had been there twice about the matter; and he must find it, *soon*. Would she tell

Miss Ashwin, most particularly, nothing about these requests.

The manly guile of this communication, as has been seen, did not deceive Mrs. Gibbs for a moment. Why should Charles want her friend's address? Why had he been to Battersea twice, since once would have assured him of Violet's absence? Whom — but one — could he have found on those premises if he went? If the young woman had refused her address, so much the better; but it made it the more probable Charles was following her. He was probably doing nothing else, nor had done since his mother last beheld him. Mrs. Gibbs had the advantage of having seen Alice once at the Lennox establishment, when Lois besought her assistance at a crisis with the girl; and once had been quite enough, for a person of any discernment. Mrs. Gibbs had even told Lois that, mark her words, she would have trouble with that girl before she had done. Why, last of all, did Charles, having successfully accustomed his tongue to Violet's first name, turn again to the formal Miss Ashwin?

Of course, in the light of Arthur's addition to the case, Mrs. Gibbs answered the last question easily. Charles had raised Violet's expectations, as careless men will do; and now, having wounded her, was ashamed of himself. Mrs. Gibbs had no more idea than her husband at what stage of things the young

pair were, but she could not but remember the regularity and constancy of their correspondence. Charles had left nobody, who had patience to listen to him, in ignorance as to that. She feared to question Violet,—it was altogether too delicate an affair for her to touch; but she saw the misery of the child, proudly concealed as it was; and being a woman of fine honour herself, felt absolutely humiliated before her. And she was brought still lower when the proposed situation for Charles, an excellent and solid advantage, resisting every test against the visionary, was laid before her eyes by Mr. Gibbs.

She did not, however, for all her wrath, fail in her duty towards her son, and his future. That stood first, as always. She gave Charles neither of the addresses he asked for; but she sent him a résumé of Lucas Warden's offer, and bade him, if he wanted work, and had still any regard for their feelings, to call on Mr. Warden at such an hour, at his office. She told him his stepfather would stand his surety, and remained his friend. She did not mention Violet by name, but when the short and very adroit letter to her son was completed, she brought it to the girl in her room, and laid it before her mutely. Violet read, and returned it with a smile.

“Is there any word you would like changed?” said Mrs. Gibbs, in a voice hard with suppressed emotion, and offended pride.

"It is good, and clever," said Violet slowly. "I always really knew you were both — since the first day I saw you, in a hayfield by the river. Do you remember that?"

"Did you care for him then?" said Mrs. Gibbs.

"Well, could anyone help it?" said Violet. "He told me so touchingly," she added, looking down, "all about it, and how little you appreciated him."

"Did you believe it?" said Mrs. Gibbs.

"Then I did, I am afraid. Not after Uncle Arthur decided to marry you. You see, I can't help believing he knows better than Charles. And Charles himself knows better than that," she added lightly.

"He makes it hard for one to believe it," said Mrs. Gibbs, and turned away. She had no wish for this very "nervy" girl to see her crying, and she was very proud of her self-control. But she could have cursed Charles — or perhaps boxed his ears — for the fool he was. She did neither, — she only signed herself with affection, a trifle more than she had intended, stamped and addressed the communication firmly, and carried it in her own hands to the post.

A couple of days dragged by in sufficient depression, nobody in spirits to suggest any amusement,

though the weather was charming; and nobody among all the Rectory inmates acting at all well, but Violet and Mr. Gibbs. Then a faint ray of light shot upon their dulness in the form of a new line from Charles, very proud and formal and foolish, but thanking his mother, saying he would consider her suggestion,—and would she have the kindness to send him various things, in accordance with a list.

It need not be added that the contemplation of this list,—most absurd and masculine in character, leaving out half the things that in any kind of life, bachelor or otherwise, he was bound to need,—and the instant satisfaction of these natural wants, by the most simple means, relieved his mother's heart more than the composing of countless clever letters could have done. It consoled all the foolish females of the Rectory circle, to an extent that surprised the Rector. Mrs. Gibbs, with Maud's skilled assistance, made up the parcel, and once more carried it all the way to the post herself. She promised Maud, since it was heavy, to look for Peacock to take it down; but excused herself later to her stepdaughters by explaining that she had looked, but could not see Peacock anywhere about the place.

The same evening she told the Rector after dinner, — Margery being shut safely in her room at work, and Violet on the sofa with a book,—that she had come to the conclusion he ought to dismiss the man.

“Convince me of it and I will,” said Mr. Gibbs. “I should warn you he has nailed back the creepers faultlessly.”

Mrs. Gibbs, who never spoke without solid reasons for speaking, especially in cases where prejudices might be presumed to exist, produced a rather startling piece of evidence. She had been by chance, she said, at the Glasswell post office that afternoon, just before post time. She had noticed, lying upon the counter of the shop, a box. It had the look of a common shoe-box, but it was marked carefully, “Flowers.” It was also carefully fastened and addressed, in the same large, rather illiterate hand. The address upon the box was that of a Mrs. Eccles, at Brixton,—(Violet looked up),—and the postmaster’s wife, on Mrs. Gibbs’ acute enquiry, admitted that Mr. Gibbs’ gardener had brought it down. He seemed in a hurry, she added. Mrs. Gibbs had made no fuss about the box being despatched, because she thought — wiser not.

“Infinitely wiser,” said the Rector. “Especially since the contents were described so conveniently upon the lid. Had the thing occurred before?”

Never before. The woman seemed surprised about it.

“Suspicious?” said the Rector.

Not the least suspicious, no. Being Mr. Peacock, the postmaster’s wife was sure it was all right.

“There you are,” said the Rector. “I wish I owned an appearance like that. If I summonsed him the whole country-side would be down on me for libel and injustice. He has an extraordinary position, socially speaking, in the neighbourhood: and Shepherd is particularly keen on him. But I knew,” he added, “that I was being systematically robbed.”

“Arthur! Since when?”

“Since yesterday morning,— wasn’t it? It’s one of the scraps of light I owe to Violet.”

Then, of course, Mrs. Gibbs had to be enlightened too, and most thoroughly enlightened, for she let no one off. She gazed from face to face in helpless indignation and perplexity.

“And you have known of these crimes,” she said severely, “both of you, for two days at least, some of them for weeks, months past, and have not sent him packing instantly? Why, good gracious, Arthur, anyone but you would have been glad of the excuse!”

“Poor Uncle Arthur,” Violet murmured to her book. “Three prizes,— the first year.”

“Have him up,” said the Rector dejectedly, addressing Mrs. Gibbs, “and have it out. But if the youngest of my family goes after him, don’t blame me.”

Mrs. Gibbs reproached him for jesting on serious

subjects, and Mr. Gibbs replied that where everything was equally serious, one had better jest, or be direct,—it came to the same thing. Violet looked at him over the back of the book, and nodded; but she rose and left the room soon after, mentioning that she would detain Margery upstairs. The fact was, she did not want to face the man again so soon.

She need not have troubled. No search in cottage, house or grounds discovered Peacock. He had saved his kind-hearted employers the pain of dismissing him by dismissing himself. On close enquiry, and at the cost of considerable pains, Mr. Gibbs found that his appearance at the post office that afternoon had been his last appearance at Glasswell. How he had gone, and whither, the Rector's wife spent her energy and ingenuity in vain to discover.

“If you ask me,” said the Rector, when the search-party, including the intelligent retriever dog, reunited in the study, and the leader of it sank exhausted into his leather chair, “I should say he went in somebody else's motor-car. He is evidently above all laws. Most probably,” added Mr. Gibbs, turning absent and gazing at the dog, “most probably a rustic deity. What do you say, Erasmus?”

“Arthur, do be practical,” said Mrs. Gibbs, who was holding a railway guide. She had already explained to him that they owed money to Peacock.

“I tell you, my dear, it's constantly happening in

books nowadays. It's the commonest thing in the world. I've more than once had a suspicion this summer that Something was about the place. You ought to see the way things grow when he looks at them. Besides, there's Margery — and Erasmus there — and Claude. Hang it all, he put Claude out in conversation, that must mean something out of the ordinary. I am beginning to be convinced — well, Violet?"

"Please excuse my appearance," said Violet, just to warn them: and it was necessary.

She had appeared, or materialised in her manner, from the upper quarters of the house: and, while her uncle was speaking, had slipped round the door. She had not descended during the interval of the search for Peacock, having pressing engagements of her own above, though she had heard about the matter through Maud. Violet herself had been in seclusion with Margery, — very much in seclusion as was evident. Her dark hair, lately brushed, was parted and tied back loosely, drooping a little more than its custom was, about her face; and she was "clothed in white samite," — or in something her uncle thought must approach to it, — mystic and wonderful beyond a doubt, but certainly a trifle unconventional as well. Both the Rector and his wife fixed her with attention and amusement, for she was clearly strung high in her manner, and her

eyes, glimmering star-like in her pale face, promised a new discovery.

It had occurred to Violet, so she explained to the world, that in the matter of Peacock, Margery might know something, if one could anyhow manage to get hold of it.

“And one did?” said Mr. Gibbs.

“This,” said Violet, extending a scrap of paper. Margery found it this afternoon, tucked into a corner of her portfolio, which she had left on the garden seat. Margery would not come down herself,—being tired,—but Violet, after certain persuasions which had lasted the entire length of hairdressing, had been allowed to bring it for the family’s enlightenment.

“It is *too* touching,” she added earnestly.

The Rector took the scrap, his comical brows set, arranged his spectacles upon his nose, and spread the communication on the table by the lamp to decipher at ease. It was not ill-written, betraying the man’s turn for order and cleanliness in all he attempted. Mr. Gibbs read it in his most impressive tone aloud, his niece and his daughter leaning over, to either side.

“MISS GIBBS,

“This with my respects to you and family and with thanks for kind treatment which is not

why I go. ('I am glad of that,' said the Rector.) I meant to speak to yr Father about my trouble which is wearing me, and then to you Miss, but words failed me short. ('So they invariably did, poor fellow,' said the Rector.) Church nor absence has done me any good from her as I hope you understand. ('I hope Margery understood,' said the Rector. 'It's as clear as daylight,' said Violet. 'Only a word left out.') I hope to be at Park Flower Show Tuesday week. ('Is that a rendez-vous?' said the Rector. 'An insurmountable enthusiasm,' said Violet. 'Do stop talking and finish it,' said Mrs. Gibbs.) One of the smaller pictures would be an agreeable keepsake — (a gale of laughter from the family: 'Oh, hush,' with an anxious frown, from Violet) — which knowing your goodness Miss I have slipped out. Mr. Gibbs should know as I have nipped those winter pots steady — ('Nipped?' said Mrs. Gibbs suspiciously. 'That's all right,' said the Rector.) — to keep back some for late which I have Chalked.

"Respectfully yours ever,

"ABEL VANE-PEACOCK."

"I suppose the end is as luminous to Uncle Arthur," said Violet, "as the first part is to Maud and me. I am certain Peacock nipped and slipped honestly, whatever he nipped and slipped, and is a

much injured man. I have seldom felt so certain of anything."

"Indeed," said the Rector. "And what does Margery feel?"

"Well, at least, Papa," Maud spoke up in turn, "she sends this down to you."

"To be laughed at," appended Violet tragically. "Perfectly heroic, I thought it, and I told her so." She put an arm around Maud, to encourage her to resistance.

"She will be happier now," said Maud, blushing. "I told her she only needed to confess to herself quite alone, and have things clear. She has never got things clear. That was why she had Violet's room, and Violet came to me."

"What?" cried the mistress of the house.

"Keep these matters to yourselves, my maidens, I advise," said the Rector. "Speak them not to the profane. They are far beyond me, anyhow. You are welcome to make a ring about Margery, to lecture and manage her to your blessed hearts' content, and flutter about in your silk sacks by night ——"

"Sacks, indeed!" said his daughter, really moved. "How can you, Papa! A lovely thing like this, which she made with her own hands! You don't deserve to have it under your eyes."

"I do, I do," said the Rector. "It is my avun-

cular perquisites. I am only being thankful no younger gentleman is about to dispute the privilege."

"Oh, but of course ——" began Violet, horrified: then caught his eye, and dissolved into space, according to her late habit, suddenly.

"Violet has no business to give up her room," said Mrs. Gibbs, when she had vanished. "I wonder you allowed it, Maud. I don't know what her father would think of us, if he knew. He asked for her to be quiet, particularly."

"I am sorry, Mamma," said Maud, lifting her chin. "I would not have deceived you unless it had been necessary. But to be wished out of the way continually, by my only sister, for weeks together, was more than I could bear. I have prayed for patience, and so I daresay has she,— but we certainly should have quarrelled soon. Violet and I had the idea at exactly the same minute ——"

"Just so, donkey," said her father. "Go to bed."

When she had gone in her turn, Mrs. Gibbs observed that perhaps it was time that the girls had separate rooms: and the Rector said that she had anticipated him.

V

MISS ASHWIN IS LAZY

News grew worse from the Bradings. Lady Brad-
ing, Dr. Ashwin wrote, was very ill as well. Her
nerves had given way, too soon, under the prolonged
strain, during which her courage had been an object
of admiration to all her surroundings. Clouds
settled low over the devoted family. The letter
the doctor sent was brief by necessity, and divided
about equally between Violet and her uncle.

“That poor boy,” said the Rector gravely over
his part. “Yes, I must go up.”

That was the suggestion, it seemed, the letter
contained.

“Are there no other children?” said Mrs. Gibbs.

“No: he’s unique, like Violet; and he adores his
mother. Claude says they could not have done with-
out him these last days,—which speaks for itself.”

The young people were silent, respectful before
tragedy. Violet’s brow was resting on her hand,
and Margery, rather faded and worn, was gazing
with set lips out upon the garden.

“Nothing to add, Miss?” the Rector addressed

his niece, seeing the sheet she held. "Professional details, I mean, of course."

Violet shook her head. "It's all very private," she said quietly.

"I retire," said the Rector: and soon after, did so.

Violet remained exaggeratedly grave, as she patted her letters together. She had quite a little pile of them, as was not unusual; for her father wrote to her regularly, as well as other less important gentlemen of his age, and various girl-friends. Violet kept her friends on paper, howsoever she hid herself in life.

After breakfast she took them away to a remote summer-house, where she was joined after an interval by Maud, two work-baskets, and Erasmus the black retriever, who was getting on in life, and showed a marked preference for Maud's reposeful company.

"He misses Peacock," said Maud, introducing Erasmus, "I washed him yesterday. Do you mind?"

Violet, absently smiling at Erasmus, did not mind. "I miss Peacock too," she said. "I am sorry to tell you, Maud, that the earwigs are starting again in this pavilion."

"Would you rather sit somewhere else, darling?" said Maud anxiously.

"No," said Violet. "Earwigs are as nothing to me, now."

This certainly suggested dark things in store. So did the fact that she sat empty-handed, and did not touch her work; but Maud knew her too well to press her. She prepared her own work, with competent rapidity, while Erasmus settled on Violet's feet with a groan. Then Maud threaded a needle, and opened the conversation.

"To-morrow," said Maud briskly, "will be the crisis."

"Which crisis, darling?" said Violet. "There are several."

"I am afraid I was selfish," said Maud. "Speaking of Peacock reminded me. I was thinking of ours. As soon as I set eyes on that letter, I said to myself — well, once get over the day of the Flower Show safely, and we are all right. You may have noticed how restless she is."

"Margery?"

"Margery. Well, that is the Flower Show impending. Did you happen to see her face when Papa offered anybody his member's ticket for it last Saturday? I wanted to say,—take it, child, for goodness' sake, and go and see him and get it over. I am afraid, Violet, her character is not really strong."

"How wonderfully clever you are, Maud," said

Violet. Maud was silent. She thought at times herself that she was not so dull as people supposed; and she never felt so sure of it as in her cousin's company.

"I am under the impression," said Violet, still vague, "that your Father sent the ticket away to somebody."

"He sent it to that Miss Eccles," said Maud, "because he has never forgotten that remark of yours that she was fond of flowers. He thought it might be a change, he said."

"Oh dear, how like him," said Violet. "And what a wonderful family you are."

It was most satisfactory to Maud's ears as a sentiment, only the tone was "sleep-walking," and the real Violet was evidently miles away. Maud knew that she might be allowed to approach in time, if she took it easily, and talked of her own affairs meanwhile.

"Of course, Margery could get in all the same for five shillings," said Maud, threading her second needle. "Or possibly half a crown. I do trust, Violet, it will be all right; but at this stage I dare not prompt her. I incline to leave it to nature. I believe her better self is slowly coming to the front."

"Erasmus, love," said Violet, "if it is not inconveniencing you too greatly, that foot is asleep."

"Kick him," said Maud briefly. "He never

understands without. Dear," she added, "I am afraid you are bothered to-day. Don't stop in here if you want to walk about." For she knew Violet's mental and physical habits, and how they reacted on one another.

"I am practising Repose," said Violet, folding her hands. "But I fear I shall never manage it as well as you, Maud. You do me more good than you know,—even the way you do your hair behind is calming. The fact is," she proceeded soon, "I have had troubling news from the outer world to-day. I wish Father could get down to Dering. I do wish it frightfully. Father must be absolutely on the Rack."

"Violet!" said Maud, appalled. "Is it as bad as that?"

"I don't want you to think me high-strung and sensational," said Violet, looking both, "so I will offer you bits out of Joan Dering's letter. Joan is not a girl who writes unless absolutely driven to it. So I suspect Bill or somebody has set her on to drag facts out of me. They are all so curious about our circumstances, always."

Maud was impressed by this familiar talk of a great house. She was also gratified that such people should be curious about the Ashwins. The Ashwins really were a very remarkable family, and Maud had the blood in her veins.

Violet's comments now on the style of the communication she held were inclined to the critical, and evidently Lady Joan, for all her governesses, could not spell. The news, however, such as it was, seemed sinister; and it made Miss Gibbs especially sad that two girls of eighteen should be discussing such things in their correspondence. Yet Maud was a little inquisitive all the same, and rested not until she had had a fair chance at the whole scandal, both facts and insinuations.

It was sufficiently "frightful," as Violet said, certainly, since it concerned an aunt of Maud's own. Aunt Evie was also of course Violet's mother, but it was hard to remember it, the girl spoke of her with such cool detachment. Aunt Evie was letting a French Marquis (of all people), whom she destined in open drawing-room converse to her daughter, make love to her in such an unguarded fashion, that the schoolgirls in the house were talking about it. That much was certain, whatever else was not. The "whatever else,"—what Violet herself would have called the "*sous-entendu*,"—was beyond Maud at five-and-twenty altogether. She never by her own choice read the books in which they occurred. She was a little surprised when her father recommended her such books occasionally, and had really in private more confidence in the curate's advice.

Violet followed her thoughts with perfect ease,

and sedulously respected her cousin's taste in the "bits" she selected. For her own part, her father was her principal anxiety. Maud was in no perplexity, at least, as to Violet's feelings towards her father. Having something of the same kind of hero-worship herself,—for all the Rector's taste in books,—she was able to meet her cousin there on common ground.

"I want passionately to go up to him, at intervals," said Violet. "I wonder if Aunt Henrietta would think me too awful if I did; just for a night, you know, darling, to learn the worst. I could easily run down again in the morning."

Maud looked grave over the project. It was just in Violet's royal style, to "run" up and down, journeys of sixty miles. Maud could never take the easy point of view belonging to "motor people."

"I should think Uncle Claude could deal with it," she said, with propriety.

"How can he, poor dear?" said Violet. "He is tied hand and foot, by Lady Brading, who always trusted him, and by Sir Rupert, who is literally at the last gasp. He can't stir from the toils about him, Maud, that is his painful position. A doctor is hardly allowed to be a man. And yet he is bound to have heard of this horror, from other sources. The Derings have crowds of acquaintance, and people getting well of things are the most uncon-

scionable gabblers of all. I really think," said Violet gravely, "that Father hears all the gossip in London; and though he spurns it naturally, he never forgets a word. That is the way he is constituted. In this case he has no escape from torture, that I can perceive."

Grave silence again. Maud was hardly up to Violet's level, in this kind of catastrophe; she preferred the less startling case of Margery. But, since Violet could always find words for everything, she let her talk, for that she knew was good for her. Also, Maud was curious still.

"Of course Father is virtually living with the Bradings," said Violet. "The servants were to have got off on Friday. Our house may be shut for all I know,—he neglects to mention it. He says the end cannot be far now, and I shall have a wire without fail, or if too late and the office shut, a scrawl. I stipulated that naturally, thinking of Margery. Father is quite aware of the immense importance, to her. . . . But even then, the poor woman would be on his hands: unless she would accept Mr. Forrest. He says she is hardly reasonable—Heaven knows. Perhaps when everybody about you is in Purgatory, you hardly feel your own. I should of course, but Father has a finer mind."

Violet was evidently low to-day, Maud was reflecting as she sewed.

"It must console him to be doing good," she said. She felt she was on her own ground here.

"It wouldn't me, the least," said Violet. "How-ever."

She gazed down at Erasmus desolately. Her other foot was now asleep, but it seemed a pity to disturb such a sheer revel of repose as that to which the retriever's attitude bore witness. Life is hard on all of us, and Erasmus was mourning Peacock, his true friend. Also he was old, and age has its privileges. Violet sighed, and suffered him.

"You could not go home for a night," observed Maud, "if the servants are all away. And the Bradings could not have you, naturally."

"No," said Violet. The impulsive plan seemed to have evaporated already, and she was gazing at the sky. "You cannot, however, keep me for ever here, delightful as you are, and exquisite as it is. The roar of the great City summons me. Miss Lennox is coming back from Ramsgate. I must plunge again soon."

"Darling," said Maud, stopping work for the first time. "You know you are not half rested, really. You will over-do things, wherever you are, so much."

"I am learning not to," returned Violet. "Have patience with my natural infirmities, Maud. The business, I am certain, will be all right, whatever else crashes about me. I am perfectly reassured

as to the status of Lennoxes. And that is my object in life at present."

"Don't be absurd," said Maud.

"My solitary object. In my best moods," said Violet, still gazing at the sky, "I think of nothing else."

"I am glad I know you in your worst moods, then."

After that, silence supervened; and Maud's watch alone could say at what late period of the morning it was broken again. Erasmus was kicked off three times, and each time settled anew, for Violet's little shoe as a pillow suited him.

"Maud," said a sleep-walking voice at last.

"Violet."

"I have just discovered, I have not run a single tuck in that white thing over there. And I promised Alice, as I value her friendship, to accomplish thirty-seven."

"That is what I alluded to," said Maud, threading another needle, "about an hour and a quarter ago. I like you best when you are lazy. Mother was heavenly when she was lazy too. Some people can't be, for their lives. I begin to feel a perfect idiot, if I sit for ten minutes idle. You were made for a lady of leisure, Violet."

"I scorn your insinuations," said Violet, "and throw that last insult in your teeth. Give me that

basket, dear, if you can reach. *No*, Erasmus, the lingering agony is too awful. I can't bear it,—I will not bear it any longer,—go! Oh, Maud, console him,—kiss his beautiful head,—he is offended!"

VI

ROUT OF THE SCHEMERS

MR. GIBBS went up to town the same afternoon, and, finding himself wanted, stayed there. Dr. Ashwin's telegram was despatched that night, but failed to get through, no doubt by the fault of the messenger. It was brought up the next morning after breakfast by a boy from Glasswell, and punctually followed by a short note,— what Violet designated a scrawl — by the second post at midday.

The despatch said, “ Brading died six this evening she is holding up, Father.” The scrawl, stamped with the Brading address, said —

“ MY DEAR CHILD,

“ Tell your hostess and such as it may concern that all is over, and better than we had feared. He was unconscious an hour before the end, and I could allow her to be with him. The certainty seems to soothe her, as I had trusted. The life was fine if short, strictly devoted to the public good, the martyrdom an injustice you can ask your uncle to defend. I stay for the funeral, of course,— no nonsense about

joining me. Robert is overwhelmed by necessary details naturally, but he will make time to come over. He is armed against fate, he tells me. Let her know."

"Where is she?" asked Violet, having read it eagerly through. "Maud, where has Margery gone?"

That was what nobody could tell her: for Margery had gone wandering, urged by the startling spur of the first telegram. Margery had a ticket for the Flower Show in her little satchel, acquired by methods of cunning and concealment quite foreign to her simple nature, and in her liberal environment, quite unnecessary. By sudden rushes, like a devastating wind from deserts that man cannot track, the need to see Abel Peacock swept across her. She repeated that she was in the hands of God, but it was a very earthly demon that had mastered her. She believed,—she repeated that she believed,—that Abel had meant, in that extraordinary note he left which she would not destroy, though Violet besought her to do so,—that she should meet him. She believed — Heaven knows what she believed, or had persuaded herself to accept as life and truth. Her imagination, seconding her passions, was proving itself capable of things Margery herself could never have conceived. She feared herself, not, like Violet,

because she knew herself too well, but because she had never really sought self-knowledge. Her elder sister, who knew her as sisters do, was right enough there. The fact, had she ever faced it, was simple enough. She was basely in love with a beautiful animal, and many have been likewise: men very openly and exultantly, and women in secret, and tormented.

For Margery knew far better, of course, all the time. Her mother's education, her father's example, both supplementing a naturally able brain, genuine if limited experience of life among her poor folk in the Glasswell neighbourhood, even a sense of the ludicrous, an intermittent wild power of mockery of herself, was not wanting to assist her. She was far from certain she meant to go to London, even now. She dreaded, with desperate shyness, the staring of familiar faces on the road, the necessity of placing herself in a public train; but still dreading, detesting, and shrinking, she took a morning walk through the woods,—in the direction of Glasswell station.

It was a long way, even by the short cut; and the path went plunging among copses, each one dear and peculiar to Margery's country-loving heart, full of images and of memories. She waited several times, for she had started early, as she was accustomed to do for painting, to avoid remark, and had even taken

the precaution to hide the painting apparatus before she set out. She had covered her trail, in short, like any criminal. The periods of waiting tried her far more than active movement did; she sat by the way on banks or stiles, her lips compressed into an obstinate wretched line, her thoughts following the same fixed round, feverish and unresting. They were fixed forward, though, those thoughts; it had not occurred to her once, being used to freedom like the air, that she could be followed.

Violet and Maud, having hastily scoured all her favourite haunts, exchanged a look, Maud's almost of triumph, Violet's of despair.

"She has done it," said Maud.

"I will not believe it," said Violet. "You should not say such things of your sister. She has gone for a walk, do you hear? — because she had a nasty headache; and I am going after her, with salts."

"It's too late," said Maud. "The London train is eleven-fifty."

"I put not my trust in time-tables," said Violet. "I put it in Margery. Explain to your Mother about lunch." And she went.

She went very swiftly, agile-footed, slipping through the light and shadow of the woods. She had walked the way with Margery before, and had no doubts which of the many winding paths to choose; for of course, notwithstanding her perfect

faith in her cousin, the line of the station was her general direction. She met nobody, so could obtain no reassurance, one way or the other. Once, in the open, she caught the white puff of a train among the distant woods, and had a momentary pang, a shock of doubt, as bad as Maud's and worse,—since all such things were worse to Violet. Was that the train Margery had taken? Had she really succumbed to this ignoble enchantment, and gone to what must be her shame: a memorable, lifelong humiliation? Would he not laugh, in that intolerable manner, when he met her face to face, as he had laughed upon the roof? Poor, pretty Margery,—Violet could not suffer for a moment the picture of that laughter. It was simply not to be borne, and turned her sick with sympathy, so that she staggered and stopped.

That particular train, as it happened, came from the opposite direction: but Violet overlooked such a trifle in her tragic communing. It was the down train from London, running into Glasswell station, that she saw; it came in at least twenty minutes before the other to the town.

At last she drew to the end of the woods, and knew by the signs that, just round the next turn and beyond the trees, the dull route of the plains was before her. The unshaded road was ugly, and very hot, and, unwilling even to look upon it, Miss

Ashwin stopped uncertainly, spurring herself to the moral and physical necessity. That road led, in ten or twelve minutes, straight to the station, the station where Margery had not gone. Was it conceivable that she had gone there? Could any girl, kin of hers, have been so crazy as to have gone one step further than this?

Margery, half an hour before her on this track, had not been so crazy. That is to say, she had gone some fifty steps nearer to the brink, round the next turning, and winced in fact, as Violet had done in imagination, at the sight of the imminent high-road. It forced her to pause, and exactly at the spot where she paused, as her cousin had hoped, her craziness had ceased, quite suddenly.

For while she waited there, debating furiously in her mind, and watching the framed white glare of the valley with distaste, a distant figure, looking very dark against the spinning sunlight of midday, had entered the frame, coming in the opposite direction up the road, and towards Margery. It came along with an easy step, but slowly, for the long climb lay before; and, besides, to one lately tied to London streets, and penned in sick-rooms, through the most torrid months of the year, the first shock of the woodland solitude was sweet.

Robert did not see her immediately, where she stood beyond him in the shadow of the trees. His

eyes, tired with watching, were dazzled in addition by the white glare of the roads. He came on, beautifully unconscious, looking downward, one hand in his pocket, the other clenching and unclenching at his side, as though he were pursuing painful thoughts.

The girl stood stiffly, motionless and mute, unable even to conceive what he must think of her, when he saw. For it was borne in upon Margery that a man with eyes like that, straight from the grim battlefield of life and death, must surely penetrate the truth when they were face to face. Robert was close on her, before he glanced up. Then he stopped, awed.

“Margery!” he exclaimed, forgetting all decorum. “And you came down to meet me?”

The clearing of his exhausted face was wonderful to see. The black band on his brown sleeve had become visible.

For which reasons, no doubt, the Rector’s daughter who saw it threw self-respect, sincerity, her hope of ultimate redemption, and all such evanescent trifles to the winds, and answered,— “Yes, Bob.” Nor did it occur to Margery for perhaps some six months afterwards, that she had basely lied. And then it was too late to apologize.

A good deal later the pair came on together up the path, in one of love’s unstudied attitudes, which

take for granted the admiration of the world. But so incredibly tactless are the hours of trains, the windings of woodland walks, and the sweet delays of lovers, that they chanced upon Miss Ashwin in a place where, with the best will in the world, she could not possibly conceal herself. She sat perched where she was by the way, and took in their appearance with amazement, rapidly growing to despair. Of all damning and reproachful visions to fall upon the view of a scheming cousin! Of all impossible situations for a person of nice taste!

No Ashwin had ever, ever done such a flagrantly immodest thing before. Of course, poor darling injured Margery had had private information of her own, and walked to the station to meet him, telling nobody. Exactly, entirely, what Violet would have done herself, what any nice-natured girl, in any society, would have been bound to do. And Maud and she, near relatives, to have such slavish suspicions!

Dropping her head, and laying the fingers of one hand tightly across her eyes, Violet waved them on with the other, imperiously as a queen.

“It’s long past lunch-time,” she said, “and I am lost. I have been lost for hours past,—indiscoverable. Take her home, Mr. Brading,—Sir Robert,—immediately.”

“Why, there’s Violet,” said Margery, waking to

the amazing discovery. It was just as though she had not seen her cousin for months. "Violet, dear, how ridiculous!"

"Not at all," said Violet desperately. "Some other girl. One who is sworn, here and now and forever more, against vulgar meddling. Consideration, Sir Robert, I expect at least from you. I adjure you, tact! Take her on, for mercy's sake, and forget about me."

Bob had gathered something from Margery on the way up, and had also possibly, during the dragging leisure of long days past, talked to his mother's doctor. Under direction or not, he left Margery, and came up to where Violet was sitting on a stone, her eyes concealed, a drooping, dejected statue of humiliation. The fallen leaves were soft all round the stone, and Robert trod lightly, as though that had been part of the wordless direction he had received. He was very near to the little statue before he spoke.

"I am under an eternal burden of obligation to your family, Miss Ashwin," he said quietly, "doubled now. I have no earthly excuse but happiness for this proceeding. Do you mind?"

Violet did not mind. She awoke to life, though, to discover suddenly what a pleasant thing a brother was. Also, she had always thought him delightful, if a trifle obvious in dialogue. He must be ex-

traordinarily moved out of his calm self to embrace her, but that was right. Their behaviour on both sides was eminently right, except that they refused to walk ahead, and let her follow, as she attempted to do, to pick up the things they dropped. Margery, both of whose hands were engaged, had already dropped her bag three times, as Robert might have seen for himself, if he had once looked round. Violet returned it to her patiently, observing that it was clear she attached no value to anything it contained.

And yet, if Violet had had the curiosity to look inside the receptacle, she would have found a five-shilling ticket for the Flower Show, opening that very day in a certain park, at twelve o'clock; and five shillings must represent a certain degree of importance, to a thrifty clergyman's daughter like Margery Gibbs.

Bob did not stay even for luncheon, late as it was when they finally reached the Rectory. He simply shook hands with Mrs. Gibbs, told her, in what Charles would have found the most unimaginative terms, that his mother was better, and Margery had made him a happy man, borrowed the Rector's bicycle, and flew back by train to town. But when the Rector, having resumed his bicycle at the station, arrived at home very tired that same night, he had already heard the news.

He spent most of the evening with Margery on his knee, and, as she was still the baby of the home, they were very foolish together. Also, as frequently happens with other babies, she ended by crying, and that at a very small provocation. He merely enquired, when he was dismissing her to bed, if she was going to sleep with her sister to-night, and be a good girl.

“No,” sobbed Margery. “They will not let me. They have turned me out,—for good!” And, still sobbing, she retired to a night of restless bliss in Violet’s room.

The Rector, having got rid of all the children, relieved himself by a prolonged silence. Then, recollecting himself, he told his wife, for her relief, that he had found time to see Warden, but not Charles. He had made, indeed, no attempt to see Charles, for he believed, at the present stage, it would have been unfruitful. Claude had given him a personal introduction to Warden, who was a very pleasant fellow, and had told him a number of things he wanted to know. Charles, it seemed, was attending regularly at the office, and behaving surprisingly well. Where and how he was living, Mr. Warden could not say, for the card Charles had offered him had only the Glasswell address upon it; but he looked — the Rector gathered from Warden’s observations — well fed and respectable. During

the production of these details Mrs. Gibbs' hands, wreathed with her knitting-wool, lay in her lap. When she had heard the last, she resumed her work without replying.

"Has Violet yet heard from the girl?" the Rector asked.

"No," said his wife.

"Humph!" said the Rector: and considered for a space with knitted brow.

"Perhaps Charles is living with the girl," said Mrs. Gibbs, who had the strong-minded quality of seizing the bull by the horns.

The Rector imagined not. She was a beautiful girl, but, he considered, not that sort at all. Also, Claude had scoffed at the idea.

"Well," said Mrs. Gibbs, "he ought to know."

"He's a fair judge of character," said the Rector, who plumed himself on the same quality.

"That is not what I meant, Arthur."

"No, my dear: you meant, that he had a notorious wife."

Finding him thus capable of dealing with bulls as well, she looked a little out of countenance, for she had collected some of the Dering girl's gossip through Maud.

"Did your brother talk about that?" she said.

"Claude? Of Eveleen? To me? Good heavens, no. I am the other party,—have always been it.

You would say she was the ordinary perfection, the way he talks of her." He waited for a period. "One little thing struck me though, Henrietta. He is anxious for me to get Violet to send him on her letters. That suggests he is short of news himself."

"Oh," said Mrs. Gibbs, "Violet says her mother never writes. The maid has answered his letters before now. A prepaid telegram is the most she will regard, and having to regard it makes her furious."

"Good God," said the Rector, very feelingly, "what a position for a man! But I can assure you, nobody would think it. He does not avoid the subject even, at least perceptibly. He is desperately proud — like her."

"Like Violet?"

"Like Margaret; Violet is the same, though, as her late proceedings testify. I greatly fear that child is suffering, Henrietta: and I dared say no word to Claude, distracted as he is. If he finds her worn out, we shall catch it. It is a tolerable responsibility, as I told him; but he won't have her back now until the Dering party breaks up. So I promised to put up with her, for his sake."

"That's all right," said Mrs. Gibbs, frowning over a knot in her knitting.

"Sure?" said the Rector.

"Quite." She glanced at him. "Don't be ab-

surd, Arthur. I have told you more than once, I like the child. There's more in her than you'd think. Is her father going to Dering after all, then?"

"Like an arrow from the bow, the day after the funeral. And brings Mrs. Claude back, according to himself, within the week."

"Well," said Mrs. Gibbs, "I trust he may, that's all."

"I have no doubt he will," returned the Rector. "And if it comes to a duel, he will kill the Frenchman. But he will never kill her, nor himself. He has too clear a sense of duty."

"Really, Arthur!" said Mrs. Gibbs. Arthur's way of regarding things made her hopeless at times, and he was terribly biased in life by his enthusiasms. However, it was evident he had reached on his own account more of the scandal than she had to offer him; so she was too wise to attempt to supplement.

"I have forgotten the Eccles number again," he observed to her after a long, and apparently drowsy interval.

"I wrote it in your book," said Mrs. Gibbs. "What do you want it for?"

She looked at him with quick suspicion, thinking of Charles. He did not even perceive the suspicion.

"I must write a line," he said, his kind eyes

watching the fire. "Turning things over lately, in the train, it struck me I had done a thoroughly blundering thing."

"What now?" said his wife patiently.

The Rector explained, as though he had been seized red-handed in crime, that he had sent his Flower Show ticket to the girl Eccles on an impulse, and had quite forgotten the probable chance of her happening upon Peacock if she went. She must, of course, have fathomed their connection with Peacock by now, by means of the flower-box. Miss Eccles, a sharp girl, would naturally think Charles' guardian had done it on purpose, which, the guardian being the Rector, he had not. Mr. Gibbs was very depressed about it. He would not be considered a scheming party, by a pretty maiden; he would sooner be thought a fool.

"Really, Arthur!" exclaimed Mrs. Gibbs, more hopelessly than ever, at this elaborate piece of quixotism.

But she let him go his way, and even brought him paper to write his "line." She told herself that he treated Alice as carefully as if she were a member of his family already; but she had long since learned not to speak all her thoughts, and was conscious even of a weak inclination to humour Arthur's follies, at times. In her hard experience of man,

such innocuous follies as he owned were almost a luxury to deal with.

But this little stroke of playful consideration, on the part of a father who owned girls, had the effect far more elaborate scheming might have failed to have,—that of unlocking Alice. She and Violet, both on their maiden dignities, had exchanged no word since the crisis. But she sent a line, with the ticket she returned, to the Rector.

“DEAR MR. GIBBS,

“I never thought of such a thing. I am doing what I can.

“With grateful thanks, yours very truly,

“A. ECCLES.”

And that slight consolation, from the last quarter she expected, was cradled by Charles' mother beneath her pillow the same night.

VII

MRS. NICKLEBY

CHARLES found Alice's address eventually, of course, in a manner we shall leave to the surmise of similarly ingenious young gentlemen. After one or two stormy interviews with Alice at Lennoxes,—for Charles had discovered a temper as well as she,—Miss Lennox herself came home from Ramsgate, and that line of communication was cut off. Consequently, Charles was driven to discover where Miss Eccles lived; and having done so in the manner undetailed, called on her mother.

He paid a prolonged call, since he continued to hope for Alice's return from work, which did not take place, and he sat through a prolonged tea-drinking episode in the course of it; but, sad to say, though he behaved like a graduate and a gentleman, he did not like Mrs. Eccles.

This had better be confessed at once, because no sign of the feeling emerged, either in her company, or later in that of her daughter; and also because Mrs. Eccles, at the time and afterwards, made no secret of the fact that she was in love with Mr.

Shovell. He absolutely went to her heart, his face, his clothes, his accent, his innocence, and the sanctity of a country Rectory that hedged him round about. Mrs. Eccles adored the country, she revelled in the clergy, she had grown up herself in a Vicarage,—did Mr. Shovell know? She knew far more about altar-cloths, vestments, livings, buryings,—not to mention Bishops,—than did Charles. She knew all about Mr. Gibbs and his dear wife, who had been such a friend to her and Alice. Charles explained, as soon as he could insert a word in the torrent, that the dear Mrs. Gibbs of Mrs. Eccles' memories was long dead, and that Mr. Gibbs was only connected quite recently with himself, by marriage. But such protestations had little effect on Mrs. Eccles, and her eloquence. The link with Mr. Shovell, to her mind, was obvious, the gratification caused by his attention in calling likewise, and she needed a great deal of strong tea to carry her through the emotions of the interview.

She was considerate of his feelings, too. She allowed the invariable interval known to the best circles, before she mentioned Alice's name, and then she only wondered if Mr. Shovell had met her daughter. He stammered some praises of Alice, and Mrs. Eccles, filling up her tea-cup, filled out his encomiums also. Alice had been her prop, her consolation, through long and direful sufferings. Mr.

Shovell could have no idea of their martyrdom, or rather of her own sacrifices for Alice. She was a good girl, considered good-looking by their small circle in Brixton,—but what is a girl? Her own health was most uncertain, her life — he might not know — had already once been despaired of, and she had often lain awake whole nights of anxiety, thinking of Alice's future. Mothers have silly fears on the subject of their girls. Now, if she had had a son ——

It is doubtful how far Mrs. Eccles would have gone, if Charles had not risen to take leave. She had some remnants of delicacy left, and she might have refrained, in his presence, from airing that ancient grievance of the baby boy who died. Yet one never knows: for a life of trials and tea is deteriorating, and Mrs. Eccles had never been strong-minded. She was one of those poor rags of humanity that set brutal or impatient witnesses thinking at once of the virtues of the Spartans, and their economic method of weeding out their less successful offspring by means of exposure in extremest youth. Such would have pronounced that Mrs. Eccles had far better, for State purposes, have been so exposed, and disposed of. Yet this same poor rag had produced the glorious young citizeness, Alice, so something could still be said for her. And Charles, who knew about the Spartans, was telling himself that

saving truth most sedulously, the whole way down the street.

The interview shook him, though, as Alice's fury of scorn in defence of Violet had not shaken him; for Alice was hampered by a generous spirit, and she had not yet descended to what might have been more workable means of hardening his heart, and discouraging his pursuit of her.

Alice was hampered also, it has to be confessed, by a liking for Charles. It was impossible not to like him, through all his extravagance and irregularity. He was born likeable, and especially to women, and especially to women of the nobler stuff. Such women rarely care for heroes, and Charles missed the heroic by several delightful degrees. He changed his mind, betrayed his thoughts and second-thoughts, contradicted himself, made himself absurd and pitiful. When he recollected that he had done so, he became miserable and dignified, and was more irresistible still. He was well-bred, also innately delicate and gentle, for the Shovells were an untainted stock, and could be tracked into the nobility of the Stuart times, when they had cleaved to their king, and fallen in his cause, absurdly and becomingly as was their wont.

Alice did not disguise from herself that she would have married him willingly, and taken charge of him finally, had things been quite different; and,

as things were, she was very near indeed to falling in love with him by an oversight, while she was scolding most vigorously. What girl disdains to be adored by such a man? Where will you find her, high-principled or the contrary, in the length or breadth of London? Miss Eccles did not at all disdain his youthful homage, his stammering rhapsodies in her praise: though being a thoroughly clever girl, she made a successful pretence at every encounter of doing so.

It made her even a little fonder of him that she had to lie for him to Miss Lennox, and lower herself permanently in the estimation of that lady. She could easily have given him away, for Miss Lennox took her word, but she did not. She amused herself by doing the contrary. She was practically alone with Miss Lennox, the week while Violet, by her father's command, still lingered among the late roses at Glasswell. She had to face searching enquiry, and the silly blabbing of little Sally Pepper, for which Alice would have been glad — very glad — to slap Sally. But Sally was a clever little “hand,” and had learnt Lennoxes' ways: so Alice merely sewed, sniffed, and retorted at intervals upon her reproachful patroness.

Miss Lennox was naturally very sorry indeed at what she heard about Alice from the people downstairs,—disappointed extremely. She understood a

young man had been calling constantly, keeping Miss Eccles company while Miss Ashwin was away. What steps Miss Lennox ought to take about Miss Ashwin's parents, who were so particular, Miss Lennox could not think, and Alice did not help her. She hoped Alice would tell her about it frankly,—several times over; but Alice never did. She only looked at "Loyce," said her mother knew the family, and re-threaded her needle on a short end of cotton, having carefully licked the thread.

All the same, the evening she came home to Brixton after Charles' call there, she was rather tired. It was no "fun" at Lennoxes in Violet's absence. She longed also to have news of Violet, but she was not going to ask for it. Violet, shut among Charles' nearest relations, was probably hearing floods of lies about her: but she might sink or swim upon the flood for Alice. It was not likely, at the stage of confidence she and Violet had reached, she was going to exonerate herself, or defend her proceedings. Mr. Shovell might exonerate her, by means of abuse, if he liked. He might or might not have done so already; it all depended on what terms young fellows like that were upon with their families. Alice could not begin to guess, indeed she plumed herself on not guessing, how such people went to work. Beyond this again, she was aware of her limitations in the art of letter-writing, and she

was aware Violet was a past expert in its mysteries. And it is reckless anyhow to try to write a thing that can hardly be said, at least in Alice's vocabulary. The thought of saying anything at all, in that quarter, made her dumb, and filled her eyes with furious tears.

Her adoration for Violet, violently repressed, since its torrential force made her almost ashamed, was a thing unique, unheard-of, as Miss Eccles believed, in the world before. The revelation of woman to woman is often just as remarkable, for all the truisms on the subject, as the revelation of woman to man. Alice had had no idea, before their meeting, that persons like Miss Ashwin existed. She thought the world consisted of jolly girls of her own sort, and fine ladies she professionally despised. She was as stilted as any blue-blooded aristocrat in her ideas, as Violet had repeatedly informed her. But that difficult fence, that looks so impenetrable to sensitive would-be trespassers on either side, having been once torn down, she was conquered instantly, on their common ground of girlhood, by Violet's sweetness. Alice was prostrate really, which accounted no doubt for her snubbing Miss Ashwin with such conscientious regularity, amidst the steady stream of her confidences.

"Well, dear, I have had a visitor," simpered Mrs. Eccles. "Guess who came to call."

"The curate," said Alice, taking off her shoes. She took off her shoes before her hat, which, Mrs. Eccles had often warned her, was vulgar.

"Not the curate,—far more interesting. A really charming young man."

"Don't be so hard on Mr. Rigley," said Alice, who had guessed. "I see you have washed up the tea-things," she added. "No, I won't be nasty, then. How long did Mr. Shovell stay?"

"Hours," said Mrs. Eccles, smiling again. "Waiting for you probably, naughty girl."

"Well," said Alice, "I only hope he has learnt his own office times better than he has mine. But it's unlikely." She sniffed. "I'm ready for supper, Mum, if you're not. No you don't." She leant and took away the teapot, which her mother was half concealing.

The usual short scene ensued between them, and Alice was as usual victorious. She put the teapot on a high shelf, as one does with a young child: waited till her mother's "nerves" recovered,—that is, till she ceased whimpering,—and then gave her a little encouragement.

"What did you think of him?" said Alice. "Chatty young character, isn't he? I never knew anyone like him for running on,—except Abel."

"Now don't say those things, Alice. It is not the least amusing. You do it simply to annoy me. I

have long abandoned any effort on Abel's part, as you ought to know. I won't be talked at, continually, on that subject."

"All right, ducky," said Alice soothingly. "I've forgiven you. But Abel was a very special line in table conversation, wasn't he? 'I'm obliged to you, Mrs. Eccles,' every time for the toast. Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember," said her mother, with petulance. "Abel was not a bad kind of fellow, originally. You were exceedingly unjust to him, and common in your manner on purpose to annoy me, and make me ashamed of you in front of him. And considering what you drove him to, I wonder you are not ashamed yourself. . . . But Mr. Shovell is very different."

"Oh, lord," murmured Alice. She suddenly began to foresee the line, and that her former lengthy penance of teasing and reproach was in store for her again. "Don't do it this evening, mother," she said suddenly. "I've got a headache, and I can't stand it."

"What have you got a headache for?" said Mrs. Eccles, momentarily diverted. "I have had a headache all day."

"Isn't it better since tea-time?" said Alice. "No, deary, I don't mean that. I'm crusty to-night,

that's a fact, all along of Miss Lennox and her eternal doddering."

"Don't say 'all along of,' Alice, when you know better."

"Owing to," corrected Alice. "Only nobody owes anything to her, least of all me."

She looked hopefully in her mother's direction, but Mrs. Eccles did not smile. Even the most well-meant attempts at humour were lost upon her. Most things were lost on Mrs. Eccles, including her daughter's headaches, and periods of strain. She alluded to the injury of the headache again presently, while she watched Alice embark on a second helping, by saying —

"You're eating enough, anyhow."

"I'm lighter by half a stone," Alice informed her, "than I was this time last year. I weighed myself at the station to see. You can owe *that* to Loyce, if you like, for it's her doing chiefly."

Mrs. Eccles was really pleased to hear this, for she liked Alice to be thin. It is really more elegant to be thin, as a cursory examination of the upper walks of our society, especially clerical, will demonstrate. She retorted on Alice that she considered it approached profanity deliberately to mispronounce a Bible name, but Alice saw she was mollified.

She therefore tried to distract her mother's

thoughts from Charles Shovell and his speaking advantages, and to coax her to other subjects, advancing well-trying decoys such as the curate's weekly readings from nice literature, which Alice sadly attended: and the misdemeanours of charwomen and general servants, compared and contrasted, with illustrations from Mrs. Eccles' experience.

It was successful, too, for a time: but it was ultimately useless. Mrs. Eccles had got a new subject, and that, after all, is something. She intended to talk of Charles: she had the best and most benevolent reasons for doing so, since her one thought now in life was for her daughter's good: and, like all things with Mrs. Eccles, talking of Charles soon became a habit simply. She pestered Alice monotonously about that "nice young Shovell," and where she had "picked him up," and what his "expectations" were likely to be from a wealthy stepfather, and the "course" they had better adopt with him, — the latter the most fruitful subject of all. She talked until Alice became fairly weary, and embittered against life. Such mothers are well able to embitter their children's lives; and Mrs. Eccles, who "wore well," physically speaking, for all her groaning and complaint, had now been at the process for a long period.

Alice tried to chaff her out of her persistent pur-

suit of the theme, and failed. She tried to speak seriously, and failed yet more dismally, for Mrs. Eccles could never bear anybody but herself to occupy the pulpit. Then the girl, recklessly ingenious, hinted that she was not herself this young Lothario's "first love," hoping to enlist at least a share of accustomed sentiment on Violet's side.

This was worse than fruitless, for it turned Mrs. Eccles' mind on cunning methods to keep Charles, to ensnare his affections by any means; and she lost herself in small senseless plotting that sickened Alice. There seemed nothing left, for a girl of her unsophisticated habit of thought, just as before in a similar situation, but sheer brutality to Charles, who fell into all the toils laid for him so easily. And every time Alice was rough with him, his devotion and humility were such that she suffered from heart-searchings afterwards; fearing that, what with sympathy, self-reproach, and indignation at her mother's proceedings, she was growing rapidly to like him too well. Her instinct was to protect him, him and his delicacy likewise, in these encounters,—yet she dared not attempt his succour, for her own sake and that of the cause she had espoused.

Her ingenuity lagged; she was tired and languid, — a dangerous condition. There were moments when her hold on her purpose slipped, and her hot blood and native instincts urged her solely. She

mastered herself in the cooler period, thought things out painfully in her manner, saw clearly but two courses left her, and made her simple choice. According to our nature and mental capacity, such problems are plain to us or the reverse. Miss Eccles, unlike her cousin Abel in the doctor's description, owned no "devil of hesitation." It was a point of difference with Hamlet, and some other famous intellects as well. She was doubtless saved some trouble by nature in the matter of her decision; and for those who suspect the existence of the heroic instinct, in primitive natures above all, we frankly offer that opportunity of depreciation.

VIII

ALICE HAS ENOUGH

“WELL,” said Alice, on a certain evening, the evening of the day that united Robert and Margery “If you want to know, I’ve almost decided to take Abel.”

“What?” cried Mrs. Eccles, furious and aghast. “You are mad, Alice. You know Abel has disgraced himself.”

“Yes,” said Alice, setting her lips. “And so, if you want to know, has Mr. Shovell. And of the two, I am sorrier for Abel, because he couldn’t help himself.”

“Alice! What do you mean?”

“Why,” the girl said, standing by the table, and looking down, “he just acted as nature led him. He can’t think, to call thinking. And this young Shovell knows much better, and for all I know, is deceiving himself and me. I can’t say about his sort,—I don’t know enough about it. Abel’s sort I know. I shall marry Abel, mother.”

“How do you know he will have you?” said her

mother cunningly. "You tired him out. He may, by now, have got another."

"Well,—there are the flower-boxes," said Alice, touching the roses on the table irresolutely.

She had not quite decided in her own mind how much to tell; for this was the night succeeding the Flower Show, to which she had gone, in unusually high spirits, with Mr. Gibbs' ticket and a friend,—a feminine friend, one of her smart acquaintances in the "profession,"—that is, from the shops.

Alice and the friend had admired the flowers exhaustively, enjoyed the air, criticised the clothing of the crowd, and jested in the most perfect style conceivable upon all their common subjects. They had been as happy as birds, or as girls on holiday can be,—until they espied Mr. Peacock, and even then, although his appearance was a shock to Alice personally, they enjoyed a new game, delightful at least to the friend, of dodging his tall figure through the tents.

But there may be something worth crediting in the talisman of true love so extolled by the poets: the divining faculty, the jewel that changes colour, lightens or pulsates when the only woman in the world is near. Howsoever it may be, Abel the "turnip" felt Alice's neighbourhood in the hot tents somehow: and once he followed, she was unable to escape. Thus he entrapped Alice and the friend,

laughing and indignant, in an impasse of the tents, and they had to turn and gird themselves for the encounter.

Then, a new miracle happened. Whether it was the presence of the friend, or the presence of the flowers,—Mr. Gibbs would have declared the latter,—Abel showed himself discreet and sensible. Dignified he always was, for physical dignity is inspiring, not only to the beholder, but to the possessor too. The friend notified Alice privately that she was “mashed” after the first five minutes; and, though Alice replied in the formula, and was sharply on her guard, she was impressed by him, and surprised.

Abel even talked!

The fact was, Abel happened to be sure of himself on the occasion. He had never been so in Alice's company before. Within the horticultural ring, he was on his own ground, one might have said, in his own temple: for the thing he preached was his religion. Alice laughed at him in a cousinly manner for the friend's benefit; but it was beyond any concealment on her part that he knew, at least for the moment, things which she desired to learn. Throughout the afternoon, while the friend chaffed and jested at her side, she had been trying to learn things from the flower-labels, the certificates and notices. Alice had natural instincts towards the soil,—not like Violet towards the dew-drops on

rose-petals. She wanted to know, not the precise shell or jewel or abstract quality that a flower suggested, but the name by which it went (invariably absurd) in the exhibitor's mouth, its habits, seasons, tastes, and the way to grow it. These were the branches of knowledge which Abel possessed, with which his otherwise limited mind was stored. If it were true, as Claude Ashwin had unkindly said, that his vocabulary was restricted to five dozen English words, it might have been contended in his defence that a quantity of *un-English* words,—percolate, pyrethrum, hybridise, *Hopkinsonii*, and the like,—had by their more generous growth shoved the common vocables out. In fact, that the common vocables were as weeds in Mr. Peacock's well-kept mind, stocked with the finest flowers of the gardener's vocabulary. After all, we cannot all of us, like Miss Eccles, possess two dialects at once for daily use!

Alice came home thoughtful, rebuffing the shafts of the friend. She was really in painful perplexity, a war of soul. She had parted from Abel at the gate, as she would have parted from any other gentleman: one such as Charles or Mr. Warden, who had never put her out by stealing a motor-car to improve his social position, or by trying to cut his throat for her, when he signally failed to do so. She chaffed not at all, nor shied at the man's halting approaches. She looked him laughing in the eyes,

and her own beautiful soft eyes told him that he was not so bad, and might be worth forgiving possibly,—some time,—at the end of all. And poor Abel went away in beatitude, trembling from head to foot, neither a thief, nor a suicide, nor even an impish monkey, such as Violet had seen on the cottage roof,—but a happy, stupid man, with a new chance at the girl of his heart granted by his flower-gods,—and Mr. Gibbs.

Alice stood by her mother's table, still in her festal gown of muslin, and handled Abel's roses, the last he had sent her from the Glasswell garden. She had known, of course, since the receipt of that last box by post, that they were inhabitants of the Glasswell garden, the very haunts where Violet was wandering now. The postmark on the box had told her much; and she had pondered at length over former conversations in Lennox's studio. She could not escape the echoes of a voice, soft and delicate and decided, to which she had never ceased from the first to listen curiously. It had taught her, in these last months, so many things. She looked at the roses — they were fading now, for all her careful nursing, and somehow the shell-coloured, dropping petals reminded her of Violet — Violet that last day, when she had lain faint, but carelessly brave, in Alice's arms. Violet had lain so at the back of her

thoughts, through all the reckless war of her untamed impulses that afternoon, for the mother-nature is very strong in such as Alice.

"I mean to take him," she said obstinately, "and that's all of it. He'll have me, anyhow, if I suggest it."

"You mean you intend to propose to him?" said Mrs. Eccles, struck with pious horror at the idea.

"Yes, Mum,—for the second time. You know," added Alice, humorously, "the first time, it didn't quite come off."

"Alice," said Mrs. Eccles, "if you intend to be vulgar, we shall never finish this conversation. I am in shocking pain to-night,"—Alice had been out at tea-time, it may be mentioned,— "and it is all I can do to talk to you."

"Don't then," said Alice. "You know it's useless, when my mind is made up."

"Obstinate," moaned the mother. "I shall be ill again, I know. I ought to see a doctor."

"You'd do better to attend to the last you had," said Alice meaningly.

"Tell me this," said Mrs. Eccles. "Have you been meeting that fellow again, in spite of my advice?" She had subsided, huddled in a dressing-gown, on the sofa: but she stared fixedly at her daughter's back, as she stood, tall and nobly-formed, beside the roses. Mrs. Eccles disapproved per-

sistently of Alice's appearance, and of all it must convey to a world she restlessly suspected. She was inclined to suspect Alice, for having such an appearance, in her less reasonable moods; for it is not a far cry, for a fool, from one attitude to the other. "You wicked girl," said Mrs. Eccles. "Have you been meeting him again, and never telling me?"

"Yes, Mum. You never advised anything of the sort, you know. You left it to me, very rightly. I met him to-day. He's all right. He's left his last place, but he met his old employer at the Show, and they talked a bit, and he's sure of a good job soon. He has lots of friends,—I never met a man with more, considering. He wants to set up on his own as soon as may be,—had better, I should say. He's a clever fellow at his trade, I never doubted that."

"Have you met him before this?" The accusing voice was monotonously persistent.

"No," said the girl carelessly. "I came across him, that's all. No escape."

"And Mr. Shovell,—and his love for you. His sacrifices ——"

"Don't talk to me of sacrifices," said Alice indignantly. "Mr. Shovell's the sort sacrifices others, all their lives. Not but what I like him," she added slowly. "He's a dear, in his way; but he's not the dear for me. I couldn't do it."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't. Don't talk to me, Mum. It's so bad for you to be angry, and I shall make you, you know, if you go on."

"I will go on. I will know about this. You have been working behind my back. You heartless girl, I believe it is simply because I toil for your good you turn against me."

"Drop it, Mother." The girl spoke under her breath. Alice was long-suffering, but she had borne much from that voice. After a pause she made a new effort, and pursued. "You could live with us, Mum, you know. Abel always thought a lot of you." This was a perfectly genuine element in her decision; but it rang a little falsely to her mother's ear, simply because the tone was unsteady. Alice could hardly reckon with her temper when she was tired: she knew it and was nervous.

"Don't flatter me," cried Mrs. Eccles, furiously, "I am not to be deluded by fair words. You do this in despite of me, on purpose. You intend to kill me, I shouldn't wonder. That is what you want. You monster of ingratitude." . . . She talked a little longer in the same vein, Alice waiting for her. "Tell me this," she said at last, "what appointments have you made with that fellow? Tell me that."

"Appointments? None. Ask Flo."

"I will not ask her. You are to answer me. How did he persuade you to it? How could he at all, unless you have been meeting in a clandestine manner,—yes, or corresponding, with all my care. With all the labour I've spent on you, Alice, to turn round on me like this. And when I am suffering so,—what did Abel say?"

"Nothing to the point," said Alice, "as usual." She waited anew, mastering herself. "Abel's all right," she repeated, using the form she had used to Violet. "You've told me so often enough, anyhow. He's shaky a bit in the upper department, but there's no harm in him really. Anyway, I can manage very well for two. I have always been pretty sure I could manage him, once married. It's marrying does the job." She bit her lip. "I expect I had better be married, anyhow. . . . There are reasons."

With that she sat down, as though she could stand no longer.

Mrs. Eccles, on the sofa, glared at her. No doubt a girl more skilled in language and what it traditionally conveys would have avoided the last phrase; but Alice, tossed by tempests, had no time to weigh phrases. Between mothers and daughters, as a rule, such anxious attention to the spoken formula is not necessary. But she had failed to follow her mother's drift in the interrogatory, though she would have done so now, had she looked round. There is but

one look between women, to convey a certain thing. Mrs. Eccles' look conveyed that suspicion unmistakably.

"Alice!" she said, after an interval of sheer breathlessness, between her teeth. She was as white as death.

The girl turned sharply. She saw the expression, saw she was disbelieved, discredited, unsupported in the hardest struggle of her life, and insulted, as well, with the worst insult an honest girl knows, from the last quarter a girl has the right to expect; and the tiger in her, so long mastered with success, flashed out. It flashed first visibly in her face, with something of the red fire she had seen once on the face of her cousin Abel.

She fell on her mother, and shook her with both hands. It said a good deal, considering the blood in her veins, and the feebleness of the thing beneath her clutch, for her training and self-mastery, that she did not kill her then and there.

But Mrs. Eccles, screaming feebly, shrank away, far too poor in spirit to face that noble storm she had aroused; and the girl, despairing of her, let her fury fall almost as soon as she had seized it, and dropped beside her against the couch, her head upon her folded arms. It was a sight for the gods to witness and lament, that humiliation of beauty and power, both at their zenith, before weakness and

silly degeneration. Alice had committed murder, no doubt, in the eyes of the calm eternal judges, the philosophers who watch our troubled life, for in that flash of time, she had wished her mother dead. Only the ultimate judge of all, we may trust, will be fairer to life and its deserts than that.

Mrs. Eccles did not die, of course; such characters do not die easily. Alice nursed her all night, for she had a sharp attack of the illness that watched on her excesses, like a wolf waiting to spring. The girl sent an excuse down to Lennoxes, by the hands of a trustworthy friend who passed that way. Charles came during the day, having heard the news: a humbled suppliant Charles, very kind, very sorry for her, and rather hopeless for himself. Alice saw him for a few minutes and did not keep him waiting for the truth. She told him simply that she was going to be married, and he must cease to think of her. She added that she was seeing nobody, could think of no man for the minute, since her mother was so ill. That was faint consolation to miserable Charles. She looked lovely, but subdued and harassed. She used the big sister's manner,—much what she had used of old to her first love, little Kit,—barely thinking what she was doing the while. But it was natural art, for it softened his despair to vague remorse. He tried to suggest devices to help

her, tried to hint at resources, all his fortune, at her call, felt he was failing miserably in all he did and said, and left her.

He went home to his lodging, and very probably cried; but there is no need to follow his proceedings, for Charles in love was not peculiar, nor notable in any way. But the thing on which, after many and tormenting reflections, he did ultimately decide, was very far, as matters eventuated, from the worst he could have done. Two letters, quoted entire, may finish his first love-story for the curious; though we warn the curious, for his sake, that the first document cannot be said to be in the best style of its celebrated author.

He wrote to Violet, on the day succeeding that of Margery's engagement:

“DEAR MISS ASHWIN,

“I happen to have heard that your friend's mother, Mrs. Eccles, is seriously ill, and she is nursing her night and day. They are two women alone. I do not know whether you think this right, or if you could do anything about it anyhow. Miss Lennox seems unable to make her have a doctor, which seems a pity.

“Yours very sincerely,

“CHARLES SHOVELL.”

Violet wrote to Dr. Ashwin, on the day of Sir Rupert Brading's funeral:

“FATHER DARLING,

“I tremble to disturb your delicately-balanced Programme, and I abase myself before Joliffe, but you had both better go to Brixton immediately. Her mother is in agonies again, she in anxiety naturally, and Charles in long-clothes,—terrified of approaching you. Consequently he approached me,—original, but I *like* him for it. Address as appended,

“V. I. A.”

Dr. Ashwin wrote nothing to anybody,—but acted without delay.

PART IV
HOME AFFAIRS

I

RETURN TO THE CAPITAL

Miss ASHWIN, arriving at the paternal mansion, passed up the steps, and through the open door. Before the servant who held it she stopped an instant, stripping off her gloves.

“How are you, Francis?” she asked him. “I hope Boulogne was a success. I thought it brave of you to go across, for such a limited time. Are Father and Mother back yet, I wonder?”

“Dr. and Mrs. Ashwin are in the drawing-room, Miss,” said the footman. “They have been back since two o’clock.”

Violet shot across the vestibule, skimmed up the three steps like a bird, and then walked with much grace and dignity across the carpeted hall to the drawing-room door. She was delighted to be home, and did not always regard the presence of the servants sufficiently. The result of which behaviour was, that Francis retired to the servants’ quarters, and informed his world there that Miss Violet was herself at any rate; and then found that Joliffe had reassured them as to that already.

Dr. Ashwin rose, on springs, at his daughter's entrance, and his wife said, "Already?" with eyebrows raised. Violet made naturally for her father, and then recollected herself, and swerved, nearly as naturally, to her mother's side. Eveleen kissed her and said she was looking well. Eveleen herself was looking well, extraordinarily, full length in a low chair; but Violet rather doubted, from her expression, if her father had been having a good time. "I told them one extra for dinner," said Violet politely. "I hope that was all right? I also told Francis he could eliminate the place, after the first bell, if necessary."

Eveleen said it would not be necessary: and her husband's mouth twitched as the girl passed to his inviting arm. She laid her head back against it, and he bent his to look at her. It was Claude's own peculiar scrutiny,—and yet different from that he used to others. It was yearning, even hungry, a little,—"*il la couvait des yeux*," in our neighbours' charming expression.

"All right?" he murmured. She assented as quietly, not to provoke her mother further. Yet she observed, as she assented, that all was barely right with him. A strong man cannot pass through a sultry season at full stretch, with only five days' holiday, and those days of torment by pin-pricks, and not show the unnatural strain a little; Claude

had never been a strong man, though he was called indefatigable, as a jest, by all his acquaintance.

"Tell me," Violet entreated him breathlessly. "Mother will excuse. I am simply expiring to know."

"You may prevent her expiring," said Eveleen, watching them.

"I followed orders," said Dr. Ashwin, "so far as I had them. It was a stiff day for Joliffe, but I think he has forgiven you. He had, among other things, to act as ambulance, which is his particular aversion. I practically ordered the woman to hospital. The girl was straining herself for no reason."

"Obstinacy," agreed Violet. "I know. Then, will the mother be all right?"

"Eventually," he said, glancing at Eveleen. "It will be a longish business,—till Christmas probably. After that she must get away to the country."

"To Devonshire," nodded Violet. She instantly assumed an operation, from his look. "Very good, I will see to that part. Thank you enormously, Father. It is quite a load off my mind. You were not very cutting to the poor dear, I trust?"

"To which poor dear?"

"Either of them."

Claude reflected conscientiously. "To the elder, I may have been. I simply cannot stand that type, in life."

"Only in an old red book," said Violet. "No, I agree with you completely. Mrs. Nick the second is not even amusing."

"What are you talking about?" said Eveleen, who knew quite well. "It might be better manners to explain."

"The Eccles affair," her husband said. "What I was telling you at Dering."

"Oh yes," said Eveleen coldly. She had heard quite enough of Alice Eccles, as a fact.

"It was necessary to speak of it," he explained to Violet, "because it affects your mother as well. She has borne, however, with the arrangement."

"What?" — Violet draw up her head, and regarded him startled.

"I hope I have not done wrong," he said, growing more apologetic at the look. "But she could not possibly be in that wretched place alone. She herself was the only person who did not see it was out of the question." Violet was still gazing, motionless. "Don't say I have put my foot in it," he said. "I fetched her here."

"Here? Alice? In this house?"

"In your mother's room, I think, at this minute. Your mother has seen her, I believe. She has been here with the caretaker, quite contented, at least I trust so. I thought the woman seemed all right. I begged Miss Alice to use the books and so on, but

I was rather short of time. I had to leave most of it to her own good nature."

"Complete, as usual," murmured Violet. She had coloured visibly pink. Then, unable to bear it longer, she flew at his neck, and embraced him with the fiercest ardour of which a quite young woman is capable.

"Violet!" Eveleen exclaimed.

"Oh goodness,—I am sorry, Mother, dear," she answered, clinging to him and being clung to. "It is gratitude, simply. Pure, cold gratitude, didn't you observe? *And* artistic appreciation. He *does* finish things you give him so gratuitously, doesn't he? I ought to expect it always, but I don't. . . . Dear, I *must* go,—do you mind terribly? I will tell you all about your Gibbises after ten."

"Why not my Gibbises after dinner?" said Claude, retaining her.

"Oh,—because M. de Fervolles is so bored by details of English rustic life. Gracious!" added Violet, putting a hand to her head, "this will make five places. I must speak to unfortunate Francis again."

"You need not," said Eveleen. "Miss Eccles is doing work for me upstairs, as it happens. They have arranged about her meals."

"Oh, the little horror," said Violet, stopping. "Wouldn't she come on any other terms? Father,

I thought better of you than that. Did she bully you, after all?"

"Don't be nonsensical, Violet," said Eveleen sharply.

"She bullied me intermittently," said Dr. Ashwin quietly. "She really is an opinionated young party. She has work to do for herself as well, I gathered. You had better go and tackle her, Pussy, that's the best."

Violet went, her face still pink and her heart thumping. What could that last remark of her father's about work be taken to imply? What Mr. Gibbs called his obscurantist methods were rather tomenting, especially when one's thoughts were already in a whirl. What could such a phrase have meant but one thing, anyhow?

Alice, in black, was working in Mrs. Ashwin's room. Her beautiful head was bent, and she stroked with her needle at intervals, in a pretty skilful manner, the ruffles she was attaching to a trail of white she held. Violet's entrance on the soft carpets was spirit-like, but she turned. Just a quick work-woman's turn of head, for it was a servant she expected.

"Time to clear out ——" she was beginning. Then she ceased, dropped her hands, and coloured gloriously, far more gloriously than Violet at her best could ever have accomplished. Her work

slipped off her knee to the floor, and she spread her splendid arms abroad. Miss Ashwin went straight to her, and fell upon her breast.

"It's all right, lovey,—don't you be anxious," said Alice, when she had clasped her a little, in sheer joy at having her again. "I've made it up with Abel, and we're getting married quietly next week. I'm awfully behind with my work, what with my mother's goings-on, and then *your* mother's on top. But I thought,—perhaps when she gets here, she'll help me in odd times. Your white work was always beautiful, whatever might be said about the rest."

She spoke at length, deliberately, soothing with her hands the while, for the younger girl was panting, striving vainly for breath to say a word. Alice was anxious, in dread almost, till she spoke, in her own soft tone.

"How sweet,—how very sweet of you to come!"

"Don't! I was trembling, I can tell you. Coming like that behind your back and all. The cheek of it, I thought, in the cab! But really, you know, your father didn't give me a chance, first or last. He's like a draught about the place, upsetting everything, and catching you unexpectedly. He has that way of slipping in questions—just like you—so you let the thing out you don't mean to, every time. I can't stick that habit," said Alice, indignantly.

"Cunning, isn't it? He *is* a nuisance," admitted

Violet, "when you want to hide things. I have disliked him myself, before now."

"I didn't want to hide mother," said Alice. "But I'd sooner not have had her go to hospital, in the state she was. That's what I wanted him to see. You don't know who mightn't hear her talking. She had fits she thought I was killing her — and that. Things I couldn't tell him, or any man, really."

Violet noticed the "really." Her father had heard. He almost invariably did hear, though the subjects were hardly aware of it, and only resented the memory vaguely, afterwards.

"You needn't tell me," she said gently. "Doctors know best,— I mean when they have been through things. Father, you know, has had an awful time himself."

"Well," said Alice, "since you say so, I guessed it. You're not so quick at making out trouble as that comes to, without. My goodness, he's like a knife! I said at last — 'Well, Dr. Ashwin, if you will have it' — and so on. . . . He didn't stir an eyelid. He just took my hands like *that*, and looked up the muscles of my arms, slowly,— and then at my eyes, like a wrestler looks. And then he said — 'You could have done it, too,'— just as if he was pleased to think it. I told him I'd killed chickens on the farm ——"

The girl stopped shuddering. She had again said more than she had meant.

"Why were your arms bare?" said Violet thoughtfully.

"Why? I forget. . . . He was trying my heart, I think. I'd had about enough that night he came. I daresay I was light-headed myself a little; but I remember saying that,—and his saying that,—and how he put me to bed after it. He's a father to have, anyhow. . . . And with Mum, too,—screaming silly as she was. My word," finished Alice, "he's a clever man."

"How — perfectly — frightful," said Violet. "And you were all alone, poor Alice?"

"Alone, yes. That's nothing. I've often been alone. Loyce came next day to see me,—she was kind enough. But she's not much ——— Good gracious, dear, there's your mother already." Alice half rose, instinctively, as the mistress of the house came into her own apartment. "We'll go along to your own room, shall we?"

Eveleen had no suggestion to offer in the matter. She looked at the girls' attitude with slightly raised brows, and then walked to her dressing-table.

"What clever man?" she enquired, in her full, easy tone.

"Your husband, Mrs. Ashwin," said Alice promptly. "I owe him a great deal. I was inform-

ing your daughter, before you came, of a thing or two that passed between us."

"Ah," said Eveleen, satisfied apparently. "Will you be so kind as to come and fasten me, Miss Eccles, later on?"

Alice replied correctly, and then followed Violet to the greater privacy of her own apartment, sniffing one single time upon the way. She remarked to Violet she hoped Mrs. Ashwin had not heard her last story, but Violet did not seem to take the point.

The fact was that Miss Eccles, who had an exquisite sense of what was incumbent upon her as guest in the house, had strings of thoughts on the subject of its occupants to which she did not give vent in words. An occasional sniff was the most her perfect manners would allow. One of the thoughts was, that she had no objection to Mrs. Ashwin's being jealous of her,—she rather enjoyed it than otherwise, and it might be useful to the doctor. Alice would have done her host any service in her power, to requite his recent services to her; and she judged that diverting his wife's attention from her flame of the moment might very well be a serviceable step. Alice had a way of thinking and judging, as we confessed before, in this rather primitive fashion. It was probably inherited from the Eccles' stock, and was no fault of her own; so critics need not press too heavily upon the failing.

II

A TIGER-LILY

ON reaching Violet's room, Miss Eccles sat on Violet's bed, and watched the girl begin her toilet, clasping her knees the while, and treating herself to a superior survey of her surroundings from time to time. She thought the room "peculiar,"—but then, so was Violet. The daintiness and order of everything won her approbation, the books she considered might have been more elegantly bound, and the pictures, after the first, she preferred not to look at at all.

"Why don't you talk?" said Violet presently. She was dressing and unpacking simultaneously, in haste, for she was late.

"You might let me look about," said Alice, very calm.

"Haven't you been in here before?"

"No," said Alice, "I don't come where I'm not invited."

"Thanks," said Violet. "That feels familiar. Do you know, it is weeks since I was really snubbed. My cousins are no good at it. Do you like the colour of those curtains?"

"Not much," said Alice. "Now don't go and make me say what I oughtn't to. There are ever so many things I ought to say, if I could only manage."

She bit her lip. Violet glanced at her reflection in the glass.

"Run some ribbons in those, will you?" she said carelessly, tossing some white things at her friend. Alice settled to the job contentedly. She could always talk better when her hands were occupied.

"I am curious about Abel," observed Violet soon, while she brushed out her hair. "Did you ask him yourself, Alice?"

"Naturally I did," said Alice. "There was nobody else to undertake it, your Dad not being about. I led up to it with Abel easily, in our kitchen. That was just after Mum went,—Abel asked for her, of course, and seemed disappointed to know he was too late. He admires Mum a good deal, you know,—always did. He would have gone away, I shouldn't wonder, but I had him in. I wasn't going to have any nonsense. A cousin and all, he had no reason to be afraid. . . . Then I started. I said,—‘Abel, you're out of a place,’—he still was then,—‘without a character,—and your only chance for another is a decent wife.’ It hadn't struck Abel quite in that light, so he looked startled. So I said — ‘My idea is, Abel, that you had better

get married to the first decent girl that asks you.' Then he took that in,— I gave him time. Then he took up his hat, and tried to get out of the door. But I nipped in between. I said — 'Hold up till I ask you, anyhow,— that's the least a man can do.' So I asked him."

"Did he refuse?" said Violet demurely, as she arranged her hair.

"No," said Alice. "He didn't accept either. He opened his mouth."

"So you supplied the answer too." Violet laughed into the glass. "You funny girl," she murmured.

"Likely he'd forgotten my name in the interval," said Miss Eccles thoughtfully. "I didn't think of that till this minute. It might account for the delay before he spoke."

"I am beginning to be perfectly sure," said Violet, "that he followed you about the kitchen on his knees. I am certain he put it beautifully, anyhow. You are heartless, Alice, really, to scoff at a real passion like that. I suspect," Violet added, in her tranquil mechanical tone, fixing the last curl, and looking at the effect sidelong, "you do it out of consideration for me: but you need not."

Alice laid down the white skirt she had finished and looked at her, needle in hand. "What I can't see," she said, "is how anyone can help hugging you on sight. Man, I mean. That's what's so odd about

it. Never mind." She returned to her occupation.

"I do not," said Violet. "Now go on where you left off. Weren't you sorry for poor Abel, really?"

"I was, dear," said Alice, "and I am. He'll have to look alive, you see, from this time forth. I shan't stand any nonsense. It's not likely he'll get the farm, after the life he's led them. His father doesn't give in so easy, once his back's up, and Jem, — that's the next, — has his head screwed on properly. Abel'll have to work and make a home for me and mother, and that's what I told him straight."

"And quite superfluously," said Violet. "I am sure he is aware of the obligation, and will work most splendidly."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Alice, and ceased her occupation, hanging thoughtful. "I can set people to work, you know," she said, looking doubtfully upon Violet. "That's what I'm good for." Then her uncertain expression changed to keenness of a sudden. "Don't put on that one, deary," she advised. "You'd look much better in the other."

Miss Ashwin, having concluded her *coiffure* in really record time, was pondering her wardrobe, and hanging doubtful between two courses, as was evident.

"I want particularly to look plain," said Violet, "for the Marquis." She dived serenely into the first of the frocks.

Miss Eccles got up from her seat at once, and snatched at it,—by which means the girls faced one another. The delicate satin robe dropped between them.

“Go on,” said Violet, lifting her eyes, for Alice was the taller. “You set Abel working,—what about Charles? Didn’t you make him do so many hours a day, for leave to see you in the evening? That’s like the Bible, a fine, ancient way. Tell me how you managed, Alice.”

“I can’t stand idlers about the world,” said Alice between her teeth.

“Then you did. I supposed so from Mr. Warden. You see, I know all about it. You have been the saving of Charles,—he is doing splendidly, and what is more he is fond of the work. Mr. Warden is struck — with his own discernment, naturally, not knowing who had wound Charles up.” A pause, the taller and more beautiful girl looking by far the more abashed of the two, though no sin but that of being loved had been hers. Violet’s slim bare arms lifted, and her hands lay on Alice’s shoulders. “I hope you weren’t too hard on him, Alice dear,” she said, smiling. “He has been used at home to care and consideration. Lilies that toil not are considered, don’t you know ——”

“Don’t,” Alice broke in. “New Testament, too, and you with an aunt in the church! You ought

to be ashamed, Miss Ashwin. . . . I can't stand your acting, dear, with that smile on your face. I can't bear your face like it is at all this evening."

"Haven't I done my hair rather well? I trusted so." She made the pretty turn of neck again.

"Likely I'd consider him," Alice pushed furiously on. "Likely, isn't it? — with you waiting behind. Lilies, indeed, — I'm a tiger-lily when I like, I can tell you. You never saw me like that, my pet, nor ever will, I hope. I'd have boxed his ears with pleasure that first night. I — I could laugh when I think now how I went on, — and he as bad."

"Don't laugh, Alice, — better not. Some laughter is awful, I think. I am sure you were a lovely tiger-lily. You've let him alone since then?"

"He's kept off, yes. He's going straight. He'll not be the worse for it in the end, trust me. Men are like that, — we've got to get used to them. Oh lord, me telling you this!" Alice groaned. "I don't know why you make me speak. It hurts you to hear, and me to say, — and yet I can't help it when you ask quick like that. . . . Oh, there's the bell, my precious dear, and you half-dressed! Now you just leave it and let me manage. Your little hands are shaking, anyway." Miss Eccles kissed them rapidly both, as they still lay on her shoulders. "I know what's pretty on you, — ought to know. That black's not your fashion at all, not for a dozen

years." She kicked it disdainfully aside, and took up the silver dress. "There you are," she said, "like a lot of moonbeams. Yes, you may put on your shoes. Now, where do you keep your jewelry,—I never can say that word. I'll Marquis him," murmured Alice, between her teeth still set.

And she did. That is, the Marquis de Fervolles looked some four times at Violet that night, in the intervals of looking forty at her mother. She certainly looked very charming in her own eerie manner, when she slid to her place at table, extremely late, with an apology. The Marquis opposite wondered with some curiosity how she, whom he had thought such a child, had grown to a woman so swiftly. She seemed absent, and joined little in the conversation, since her father was talking brilliantly; she smiled, and dropped a word occasionally, French or English, just on the level of the dialogue, to sustain him; and she hardly glanced at M. de Fervolles, though he faced her. But the Marquis, who was persistent by nature, got in a word with her later: for she agreed after dinner, at a word from her father, to play.

As with every art to which the Ashwins gave their serious attention, there was no nonsense about Violet's playing. She was already, though in the bud, a very fine performer, the power in her slim

arms and fingers surprising, the force of feeling startling to those who had seen her only in her more languid moods. Her style was highly coloured, like the bedroom curtains of which Alice disapproved. Dr. Ashwin watched his wife's face covertly while the music proceeded, but it never changed. The Marquis turned from his soliloquy at Eveleen's side to look at the girl with new, though lazy surprise. When she ceased, he told her that she was "admirably well-dowered," and he said it seriously, without a super-added compliment. Violet, who had played for her father, smiled wanly and shrugged slightly, sitting lonely in the distance on the stool.

"It is hardly a young lady's music, however," chirped the Marquis towards Eveleen. "Tempestuous, a trifle, *hein?* "

"It was loud," said Eveleen.

"It was an invocation to revolt," declared her husband, in his most definite manner, from the rear.

"Aha?" said the Marquis. "Revolt? And directed to whom?"

"Certainly to the English," said Violet from the distance. "The French never need it, do they?"

"But, Mademoiselle," protested the interested Marquis. "You would not summon Madame your Mamma to revolt, surely? *Quelle honte!* "

"Pray do," said Claude. "Her temperament

even requires it at intervals. She needs, before all things, to be stirred."

The Marquis answered with an unguarded platitude,— for he had been suffering for some time from the fact, so he felt the allusion. He looked at Eveleen, who was engaged with a bracelet-clasp which had caught, with surprising pertinacity, in a fall of precious lace. It interested her, apparently, rather more than them.

Violet rose, went across to her father in the shade, and extending a finger to him, said in English —

"Was it enough?"

"More than enough," said he, taking the finger. "I had intended, before you moved, to ask you to play me a Berceuse."

"A Berceuse!" She threw back her head and laughed,— her pretty, rare laugh. Eveleen glanced once in their direction, as though scenting conspiracy. Dr. Ashwin was smiling too.

M. de Fervolles, straining to follow English, wondered if it could be he, the father, after all, to whom the "Invocation to Revolt" had been addressed. The Marquis trusted not. The Marquis was of Miss Maud Gibbs' opinion that such young girls should be innocent completely of their elders' affairs. He quite longed for a moonlight sylph such as this to be unconcerned,— but one could never tell

in this amazing country. He paid close attention to the proceedings of the pair while he waited for Eveleen to notice him again.

Dr. Ashwin, at her approach from the piano, had inconspicuously laid aside his cigarette. Violet took it up daintily between two fingers, and replaced it whence it had been taken. It was prettily done, and M. de Fervolles quite wished it had been he.

"One's so gorgeous to-night," confided Claude, in explanation. He touched her shimmering drapery curiously.

"That's Alice," confided Violet. "Alice, as you said, is an opinionated girl. She simply trampled the one I meant to wear, and kicked it aside."

The Marquis was astonished to learn what the English bear from their servants.

"I had meant to keep this for my birthday," Violet proceeded, her back still turned to the visitor.

"Oh, have another for your birthday," said Claude.

"No, Father, no. I can-*not* afford it."

"White," said Claude. "Not quite white. Whiteish."

"Dirty?" said Violet.

"Pearl-colour," said the Marquis gently behind.

"There," said Violet, without turning. "M. de Fervolles knows the trade expression. Shall I make Myself a pearl-coloured dress, Father? I am start-

ing work early to-morrow, you know. And it comes cheaper, considerably."

A pause. Violet had cornered him. He sought desperately for a response.

"I will order one of the firm," he said at last, "if Miss Alice will undertake the commission."

A second pause. He had cornered Violet. Lennoxes had evidently conquered him, and her faith in Alice was his. She longed to express her sentiments of exaltation, and to make him feel them: but the company behind was not quite suitable.

"Claude," said Eveleen at this juncture, holding out her wrist. She had only by her fumbling made confusion worse confounded in the quarrel between her fine lace, and the bracelet-chain.

"Permit me," said the Marquis eagerly; but Eveleen, slightly pouting, still held her hand towards Claude. She knew exactly what men were good for, that expression said, and might be left to judge. Her husband rose after a languid instant, and approached to her service with a smile.

He recognised at least, if de Fervolles did not, that there had been not the least conscious coquetry in the movement. The lace and the bracelet merely represented one of those delicate complications of life, needing patience with soft threads, and knowledge of fine gold, to disentwine successfully. The Ashwins possessed these qualities, and Eveleen really

could not spare the necessary attention. She did not object, of course, by the way, to the operator's fine touch upon her arm.

She shook her wrist when it was loose, without thanking him, and returned to her desultory dialogue with the guest.

"It is no use," said Violet, at her most high-strung, to Alice later, "it is no use talking to me about Mother. Mother is Divine. I saw Father thinking so at the same time as I did. We are all perfect pigmies,—grimacing pigmies,—compared with her. . . . She put the Marquis out four times,—I counted, darling,—by missing his point altogether. I am really sorry for the man, sometimes."

III

THE BIRTHDAY

I

NONE of the Glasswell contingent, except the Rector and Charles, came to Violet's birthday party. The Rector, on the arrival of the invitation, left his wife to choose her line; and Mrs. Gibbs, by now most resolutely on Violet's side, wrote a letter so keenly worded, that even Eveleen could not pretend to misunderstand it; and which made her very angry indeed for the three minutes before she burnt it. After that Mrs. Gibbs returned calmly to her occupation; though she admitted, from the educational point of view, that it would be good for Maud to go.

The Rector actually stayed in the house, since the dance was to be late, and Eveleen saw no way to avoid him. She did not care for Mr. Gibbs, which was ungrateful, considering his rapt interest in her. He belonged, as he had said himself, to the "other party," the party that had tried to dissuade Claude from his marriage; and Eveleen, calm as she was, never forgave such things. She disliked the girls too, vaguely,—Margery's prettiness and

natural elegance always vexed her; but fortunately Margery was detained, or detained herself for Robert's sake, at Newnham College; and Maud, despite all the cunning persuasions of her circle, and a new dress, turned shy at the ultimate moment and refused to move.

Various other people failed as well,—young Brading was in mourning, and the heir of the Derings, a likely youth and fond of Eveleen, had quarrelled with the Marquis de Fervolles at Dering Park, and was sulking rather badly. His brother Bill came, though, and his sister Joan,—a young person of breezy spirits and a high voice who had a mission for “waking up” the world, only counteracted in this particular house by a reverential awe for Violet's cleverness.

Of the guests, Mr. Gibbs came first, towards seven o'clock, and found Violet and Claude in the drawing-room. Charles, who arrived shortly after, had been gracefully asked by the family to meet his stepfather, and would far sooner have avoided the necessity.

Charles was recovering slowly from his infatuation, but, in his convalescent state, he felt nervous of everybody, and shy above all of a chance meeting with Alice. He took precautions on the present occasion, and made enquiries, discovering from Miss Lennox finally, to his great relief, that though Mrs.

Peacock had for some time returned from her honeymoon, she was very much engaged at home; for Abel and Alice had, by a lucky stroke, got the old house at Brixton off their hands, and had taken another at Wimbledon, near which locality Abel had his new garden. Thus Alice, what with house-moving, and her mother still in hospital, was much taken up, and was only to drop in at Harley Street, according to Miss Lennox, to dress Miss Ashwin, early.

Charles trusted he was not early, and so had safely escaped all chance of seeing her. But, alas! when he came, the daughter of the house was still too evidently not dressed. On the contrary, she still wore the artist's pinafore of blue linen, which she had donned to finish the decorations in the hall, and thus enveloped and disguised, she was sitting on the Rector's knee, and being teased by him with great complacency.

"Oh, Charles, how nice," said Violet: gave him two fingers, and turned to her uncle again.

And this leads us to the most painful part of our confession of the revised circumstances with which we have to deal. Violet was not, at this period, treating Charles very nicely. She did not even give him the close and comforting attention, the soft sympathy, upon which he had quite learned to count, during the early part of their acquaintance. She

never supplied him with words or meanings when he hesitated. She never softened by a sweet suggestion the attacks of others. She went through all the forms with him pleasantly, but just as she would have done with any other man. She was infinitely more cordial and mischievous, Charles noticed with surprised disgust, with her father's secretary than she was with him. She seemed to be looking a little beyond him all the time, and only reminding herself at intervals of a cousinly duty. In short, she appeared to have studied Charles very completely, extracted the last crumb of interest and amusement the perusal could afford, and dropped the book. This is an exasperating situation for a man; especially if the perusal has been abandoned, too evidently, for that of other and newer publications.

Agitating reports eddied about London, and came to Mr. Shovell's ears through friends, of this match or that being under consideration, of this title or that being destined by the astonishingly successful doctor for his only daughter. There was a Frenchman, for instance, Charles heard of recently for the first time. He examined his stepfather and Mr. Warden both cautiously on the subject, and found they had both known of this aspirant — Mr. Warden of several others as well, — for ages past, and taken him quite for granted. Their general attitude of thinking nothing too high for Violet was surprising to Charles.

He had the misfortune to meet the Frenchman at the Ashwins', betrayed an inadequate knowledge of the tongue he used, and despised him bitterly in consequence. Yet the Frenchman could not be said to be a lout, did look at Violet rather often, and made remarks to her to which she seemed to find response worth while. Very often, now, she never responded to Charles' sallies at all; and sometimes when she did, she gave him to understand he was rather childish.

Yet he was talking better, if anything, than in the spring; for he felt a responsible man now, held a conspicuous post in a celebrated publishing house, belonged to a literary club,—and was understood by several of his male acquaintance to have been through a love affair. It must rapidly be appended, however, to Charles' credit, that though the Eccles affair would have been a real asset to his standing, in the opinion of a number of these new acquaintances, he did not boast of it at all. He "made a point of never alluding," indeed, according to the best standards of Alice's Brixton fraternity. So he had learned something by the hot experience, at least.

Violet, it seemed on his entrance, was on the still vexed question of a gift she had received that morning.

"Simply suicidal, isn't it?" Charles overheard in her bitter tone. "No efforts of mine will save him

now. I told the kitchen to-day that, economically speaking, I cut the rope. What do you suppose, Uncle Arthur, I can do with a thing like that?"

"Wear it," the Rector suggested.

"Once in ten years, perhaps," said Violet. "And in between?"

"Put it in your mother's box," said Claude from the rear. Violet did not hear him, apparently.

"I shall have to wear them to-night, of course; but I shall be miserable all the time. Wretched! And nobody will look at me, *myself*, I mean, Uncle Arthur, at all. People who present jewellery never seem to consider that. And there is Alice's frock — just divine, as even Mother admits; and I do want to advertise the firm. You know something of advertisement, Uncle Arthur ——"

"Do I?" said the Rector, panic-stricken. "How?"

"Well,—missions and such things. Don't you? Take Bazaars. Your reason will tell you that if you want to advertise, at a Church Bazaar, a handkerchief worked by Maud, you would not stick the Cullinan diamond just beside it. However prejudiced in favour, I mean, the eye would slip aside."

"So would the diamond, very soon," said the Rector. "After all, I should not be wretched long."

"Charles ——" said Violet, making the gentleman her father was addressing start,— "Charles has

offered to be a detective, and keep his eyes fixed firmly on me to-night. But goodness, I'd never trust Charles at that, would you?"

Both the Rector and the doctor laughed at this sally, and Charles looked even more than necessarily out of countenance. He thought it almost pert, privately,—from a girl.

"Ladies owning pearls had far better have a legal protector," said the Rector. "I mean to say, of course, a professional one."

"I have — not — quite decided," said Miss Ashwin, with a nice air of balancing the suggestion.

Charles wished his stepfather would not. His own family at least might show more feeling for him. The only person present with any consideration at all was the last he would have expected,—his host. Dr. Ashwin, of whom he had been infinitely more terrified than anybody, when he summoned his scattered courage for the first time after his divagation, and called at the house, had been extremely careful with him; really anxious, one would have said, to make his acquaintance. It was not unfathomable, really, since Lucas Warden had warned him of Charles' unpretentious talents, probably; and the doctor wished, with the best intentions, to induce him to shine. Charles hoped he had pleased Dr. Ashwin in various short and carefully-studied conversations, but he never knew.

When Lucas Warden was there as well, Dr. Ashwin generally answered Warden, comprising Charles in the answer, as it were. When they were *tête-à-tête* he frequently looked beyond Mr. Shovell, at other people, while he replied. He was watching his daughter, and listening to her, evidently, all the time he discussed the newer publications with Charles. People who did two things at once, both well, were foreign to Charles' experience and his sympathy; and he trusted that Violet had not inherited a tendency to these rather cheap theatrical effects.

Yet he began to doubt it, as soon as the talk became general. She was certainly witty,—up to her father again and again. They had the air of two good fencers, well in practice, and regarded as a game, it was pretty enough to attend to. It was when it became warfare, that Charles objected; for women, as a general rule, should never take the buttons off their foils, or at least with a male opponent. They are known to pink one another, that is a favourite witticism at their expense.

Violet was excited, of course, as birthday ladies often are. The pearls, or her uncle's unaccustomed presence under the roof, may have been responsible,—or even the somewhat crushing labours in store. For Violet, as usual, had the principal burden of the entertainment and the arrangements for it

upon her shoulders. Her mother considered, no doubt, that she had done quite enough in originating the idea of the party. Genius as a rule originates, and ordinary restless talent carries out the scheme. Beyond the first inspiration of it, Eveleen's efforts for the great occasion had been confined to giving up the long drawing-room to dancers: and to vetoing, beyond any further question, certain guests. Violet and Claude, she supposed, could do the rest between them.

Mrs. Ashwin herself came in before the discussion could become too dangerously clever, and put an end to all danger of the kind by her appearance quite successfully. Eveleen was a resplendent vision, with several shimmering scarves disguising her bare throat and arms, for she was dressed. The Rector and Charles rose in haste, and Violet was dislodged from her uncle's knee. Eveleen greeted her husband's connections vaguely, and looked about the room.

"Oh, there they are," she said, without appearing to address her daughter. "The girl reminded me. She said you would never have the sense to lock them, which seems to show her judgment. You had better take them up, that is, if you ever mean to dress at all. I am inclined to think you don't deserve to have such things, if you can't take better care of them."

"Oh, Mother, dear," said Violet. "The tail of

Father's eye was on them constantly; and Mr. Shovell, a perfect watch-dog, is about."

"You mean they are on the table all the time?" cried Mr. Gibbs. "Give me a private view this instant, you hussy, or I decamp."

His brother-in-law reached the case, and the milky glory of Violet's pearls was disclosed to him. The Rector was properly impressed, with an unclerical whistle. Charles gazed at Mrs. Ashwin fascinated, and made remarks mechanically for her daughter's ear. He had never seen her at night before, and Eveleen was far, far best at night.

"Ripping," he said with unction of the necklace. "Put them on."

"I couldn't over this," said Violet, touching the cumbering pinafore. "I'll show you on Mother, though," she added. "Wait."

Turning about, she flung the little string adroitly round her mother's neck, before she could resist: and Eveleen did not resist seriously. She took it, one might have said, as a natural attention, and stood to be looked at, twisting the pearls into comfort with one white hand; for they clasped her splendid throat more closely than Violet's, and a pearl or two more would have been necessary, as the wearer had already decided at leisure, to give the whole it's just effect.

The effect was quite sufficient for its immediate audience, however.

"It's a pity not to leave them there," murmured Violet, after a few seconds' breathless pause. "Isn't it, Mr. Shovell?"

Poor Charles blushed scarlet: and simultaneously, Dr. Ashwin caught his daughter, pinafore and all, from behind, and drew her back upon his knee.

"You are growing shrewish," he said in his soft staccato. "I cannot have you so to-day. Mr. Shovell has something which he longs to give you, if you would be, for one moment, kind."

Violet's eyes, rather wild to-night, came to rest on Charles' face, just a passing flash of attention. Then she glanced upward.

"Very good," she said. "But you have got my hand."

The doctor extended the right hand he had captured; and Charles, still blushing, laid a little book upon it.

"Oh," said Violet, having looked at the author's name upon the book. A pause. "All your youthful follies confessed?" she queried lightly.

"None of them," said Charles.

Looking down, flushed and conscious, he was handsome, and Dr. Ashwin had a weakness for handsome youths. When Charles was furthest

from trying to attract, his attractions not infrequently surprised the doctor. Claude was grateful when this occurred, for he had made it part of his serious business, for some time past, to like Charles; and as his business covered a wide field, and all sections of it had weighed doubly upon his shoulders of late, it was soothing to be spared even a small department of the general labour of life.

Violet glanced at a few dates, prefixed to the poems, casually. She had an excellent memory for dates, as Charles had remarked before this.

"Who found you out?" she demanded. "Mr. Warden?"

"I showed him a few old ones: and he said he would have the rest. I couldn't help it, really."

"Any left out?" said Violet.

"Quite a lot," retorted Charles. He added huffily,— "You can refuse it if you like."

"Can I, Father,—after this conversation?"

"Certainly not," said Dr. Ashwin. "You are flattered,—and will treasure it, and thank the author."

"Thank you, Charles," said Violet. "It's rather — funnier than the pearls." And such was the tone, that Charles was satisfied. He had at least surprised her. That is the very first stage of all in love, of course; but then, he had long since been taught that he had to go back,—right back,—to the beginning.

II

A terrible tragedy,— as it seemed,— was the next thing to occur. Francis, the footman, looking very solemn indeed, rather portentous, came in with a note on a salver, and stopped beside his master. Very much at his ease, the doctor opened and read the note, over Violet's recumbent head.

“ Good, I will come,” he said. “ Tell Joliffe.”

“ Oh, Father, dearest,” the girl cried, starting and clinging to him. “ Not to-night.”

“ Necessity knows no law,” he said. “ I'm sorry, Pussy.”

He put her aside with decision, and got up. He dropped a remark as he passed his wife,— the name of a house,— which, low as it was spoken, sent a thrill through all the room,— even, sad to admit, the Socialist Rector.

“ Really, Claude, you are going it,” he murmured, protesting. “ Don't let us detain you.”

“ You couldn't,” said his brother-in-law, with a glance. “ It's serious.”

“ It's the second time,” Eveleen was roused to observe, when he had gone.

She did not appear the least complacent, merely offered it for their information: that, as Violet had said to Alice, was her secret. For no one who knew Mrs. Ashwin at all, that is, who took the trouble

to follow her actions, could doubt that the kind of thing gratified her really. Eveleen's beautiful exterior was a perfect non-conductor of all warmth of emotion, whether creditable or otherwise. Anger she showed best, and that was what her daughter called "white" anger, a kind of still transfusing glow. On this occasion she betrayed neither approval nor apprehension, though there was room for both. She seemed quite oblivious, for instance, of any little inconvenience that might ensue from Claude's desertion of his accustomed post, in the social campaign she was contemplating. The chances were, of course, that he had seen about everything beforehand, or was engaged in seeing now before he left. The chances were such, considering his daughter was closely concerned in the present instance, that Eveleen took them tranquilly; and, having looked the remaining occupants of her reception-room over at ease, moored herself temporarily, for want of better, by Charles.

Altogether, few women of Mr. Shovell's acquaintance could have appeared less put out by the enforced detention of a distinguished husband on an occasion of note than Mrs. Ashwin. It was no doubt unselfishness, Charles thought, and she was considering the doctor's advantage rather than her own. She was perfectly saintly about it, in Charles' view, and, like the adroit hostess she naturally was, let the

Marquis de Fervolles, an accomplished man of a certain age who knew the habits of the house, take her husband's place in upholding her, both before and after the arrival of the guests.

The Rector was amazed: and it took much to amaze him, for he was, for all his simplicity, a man of considerable experience. Mr. Gibbs had thought Claude looking ill, and anxious, and strained, and all that a man who was making wealth and a high position hand over hand for his wife, should not have been allowed by that wife to look. She must, he thought, be doing it out of natural deviltry, for there was no possibility,—family bias apart,—of comparing the two men. The Frenchman was barely good-looking, barely well-made, and quite superficially clever. His wit was a thin varnish, his breeding, to those with any instinct for real civility, did not exist. Upon titles and such unpractical appendages Mr. Gibbs, knowing Eveleen, did not dwell. Nor had M. de Fervolles, by any means, the manner of the conqueror that is said to mean so much to woman. He was restless and jealous, he gnawed his fingers, as the plays would say: as though even now, at this obviously late stage of affairs, he was not entirely sure of her nor of his own position. The whole thing looked ugly to Mr. Gibbs observing it, and worse for its setting; for, quite

apart from all question in the case of attraction or advantage, the fact remained prominent that such an exhibition, on an occasion deliberately designed for the diversion of youth, was odiously out of place. The Rector, with his instinct towards the young and their rights, in revelry above all, and with his sterner standard of a generation back in the matter of example, felt offended in his own person, for the entire company.

The only thing that amazed him more than Eveleen's behaviour, was her daughter's accustomed and far from cynical toleration of it. He had not realised that at Glasswell. He thought that, with a not uncommon weakness of her age, the girl was posing a little, exaggerating romantically an ordinary, if unfortunate situation. He could not see now that it was the least ordinary, or that Violet's rendering of it, even as hinted so long since in the rose-garden to his sceptical stepson, was exaggerated in the least. He was so genuinely perplexed in his search for any possible motive Eveleen could have in such an apparently suicidal course of action that, had it not been for Violet's easy attitude towards it, and that of certain other young people in the gathering as well, he would have been driven to believe she was doing it to exasperate him personally, to tease a long-recognised opponent. For that she stored grudges and repaid them at

leisure, he and Margaret had long since had reason to know. He only wished — he wished with all his heart for Claude — that it might prove so: but he doubted it, sadly.

It was a vastly pretty spectacle he had beneath his eyes, as he stood watching the black throng meet the white in the embowered hall, melt into it rapidly, — for all were friends together on the occasion, — and spread airily in couples about the rooms. The numbers, owing to failures of importance whom Mrs. Ashwin's exquisite standard would not replace, were not excessive; but her choice had been apt in one way, for all were equally matched; and the extra space in the ballroom, which the party's reduction permitted, added to the general grace and freedom of movement, naturally. The Rector, having Mr. Warden and a number of Violet's other mature admirers to support him, chaffed, flirted, flattered, and forgot his dignity to his heart's content, since he was encouraged on all sides to do so. But his persistent enigma would not leave him, and he was adding unconsciously to the evidence upon it, all the time.

His observations of the dancers soon picked out the two young Derings, habitués of a fast house themselves, as he gathered by their behaviour, and gay, unguarded remarks. He listened to nothing deliberately, but Lady Joan especially, the blurting

type of girl just out of the schoolroom, uttered words in his hearing to her partners, that left no doubt in his mind how the pair he was concerned with were spoken of abroad.

“He reminds me of a monkey on a stick,” said Lady Joan. “And she’s had him a bit too long, you know, and just makes him jump now and then.”

“Or a butterfly on a pin,” said her equally lively partner. “That wriggles rather better, you know. Poor chap.” And they were whirled off into the *mêlée*.

So it was the Marquis the gilded youth of London pitied — not Claude. It was a small consolation, though the Rector wondered how long it was since Claude had had his era of pity.

At a certain stage of the evening’s affairs, he turned away from the door where he had been watching, almost in disgust, and aware of sudden weariness. He retreated finally, having sought in vain another retiring-place, to his brother-in-law’s small study, out of the passage at the back of the hall. The secretary Ford was there, all in his war paint, for he had escaped an instant from a partner on the upper floor, to answer a dispatch just arrived by the evening post. Mr. Gibbs enquired if he was interrupting, and then if the study figured as a sitting-out room, and Mr. Ford laughed a negative to both questions.

"I kept a fire here," he observed, "in case the doctor preferred to lie low when he came in. He will be late, probably."

"And is not wanted," suggested the Rector.

"Except by Miss Ashwin," said the young man, still writing busily, and not raising his eyes. It was evident he was in all the secrets, as indeed was probable enough, since he was a regular inmate.

"Do you consider Ashwin is well?" said Mr. Gibbs, advancing to the fire. Eveleen faced him even here, a magnificent photograph in the centre of the chimney-shelf, doing full justice to the imposing first flood of her beauty. The man she most goaded was still bound, by that miraculous spell of hers, to keep her near, fronting him, even in his working hours. Of all things he had observed that night, that portrait was not the least amazing to Mr. Gibbs.

"No, sir," Mr. Ford replied to his last question. "I only assume he is well, in my answers to fifty people, every day. No other way for it, unless I want to be chucked. Which I don't," he added calmly. He rang, gave his notes to Francis, excused himself to Mr. Gibbs by the remark that Miss Ashwin was waiting for him, and flew, two steps at a time, up the uncarpeted back stairs.

Mr. Gibbs, lighting a pipe in his seclusion, reflected that he was probably a good secretary, since

Claude had him, certainly a nicely-bred youth and devoted to his chief: yet he was none the less the same "amenable" Ford who went outside his duties on the sly to write Mrs. Ashwin's letters, because he recollected Violet had used the name. In virtue of which considerations, Eveleen was in spite of all a marvellous woman: and Henrietta at home was still unjust.

It was after midnight when Claude returned, and he made straight for his study. He came in as a man does who seeks solitude, but when he saw the Rector smoking by the fire, his expression changed by a mere fraction — nothing to matter. The recording angel should have noted that in Mr. Gibbs' favour.

"Bored already, Arthur?" he said brusquely. "Hasn't Violet been behaving?"

"Perfectly," said Mr. Gibbs. "Violet is leading my stepson a dog's life, for which I shall be bound to thank her hereafter. I think he rather thought he was going to fill up her programme. He practically hinted as much to me after dinner. He is such an irreducibly sanguine scamp."

"What's he got?" said Claude, without a smile.

"One waltz and an extra: a very doubtful extra, Claude, indeed. Rather hard lines, don't you think?"

"She knows best. I wouldn't swear it was hard lines."

"She suffered then?" The father nodded. "More than necessary, probably?" He shrugged.

"I never thought myself her fix was serious," pursued the Rector. "What about yours?"

There was a prolonged silence, and with his habit of admiration of the younger man, he was almost sorry he had attempted it. He was the other party, and the Ashwins a bitterly proud stock. Also he was a priest; and priests, as none knew better or said more often than Mr. Gibbs, are pestilently presumptuous often, by a mere habit of the trade, quite without their proper sphere of influence. Claude was without his, naturally, but the Rector loved him: and that, he believed, excused the venture.

Nothing happened for a considerable time, and then the younger man turned half away, a movement like a wince which concealed his face from his companion.

"She's playing with me," he groaned, his arm contracting and his hand clenching on the shelf against which he leant. "I shall have to give in, Arthur. I shan't be able to get through."

"Have you evidence?" said the Rector.

"I could get it — so they say."

"But won't, eh?" He rose and grasped the nearer arm. "Keep it up, Claude," he said quietly, "till Violet is married. It won't be so long to wait. It cannot be wrong, surely, to think of that."

“And after her — the deluge. Very well.” After another pause, he dropped his arm from the shelf and turned again. “I must go up,” he remarked, looking hard at the Rector, which was his habit when he was shy.

“Rubbish, you need not. You always think you are indispensable. I tell you, the girl’s a perfect hostess; I only wish my little coward at home could see. I never saw such natural ease,—allowing for its being unnatural, I mean. Now, see here, young man,—have you dined?”

“I have, Arthur,—particularly well. Do you imagine I neglect my food? Evie would be having a pleasant time as a widow if I did. Are you coming or not? Very good,—lazy brute. The best cigars are in that locker. There’s the key, and don’t let Ford get hold of it. He thinks this is his room, you know, and it’s mine. . . . And keep up the fire, will you? I shall want it later on.”

“I shall let it out,” observed the Rector, sinking back upon his comfortable chair. “It’s an hour past my bedtime, anyhow. I never knew anything like the hours you place-hunting parvenus keep.”

Claude, on the verge of going, stopped at the door.

“I say,” he said, with a peculiar expression. “What do you bet I don’t knock that fellow out before the evening’s over?”

“Nothing,” said the Rector piously. “Betting is against my principles, I am thankful to say.”

His brother-in-law laughed, and disappeared; and Mr. Gibbs contented himself with saying, “Fool!” to Eveleen’s picture. For which flat defiance of a scriptural precept we may trust he was not damned.

IV

INAUGURATES REVOLT

BUT the evening was far from over yet, even for the exhausted Rector. That subtle spark in Claude's eye portended small peace for others, as he might have recollected if he had not been so sleepy; for he had suffered by it, himself, in days of old.

The master of the house passed up the ball-room, slowly of necessity, for the dance was ending, and he moved against a growing current issuing to the hall. He was greeted on all sides as he went, and replied neatly and indifferently, in his fashion. He could guess very well what the bright, amused gaze of several of these young creatures upon him implied; for Claude was far nearer to the present generation in spirit than the Rector, and he gave the sharpness of youth its due. He was not compassionated, at least; it was merely that the sight of him, at that juncture, amused the company. Dr. Ashwin was perfectly willing to amuse his guests by such simple means, or indeed by any other means in his power. He proceeded at leisure to do so.

Violet called to him as he passed, through the melting wreaths of the dance. "Father, is that you? I have kept the next,—fourteen."

"I am not dancing," he replied, and pushed steadily on his way.

"Oh, you horror," cried Violet after him. "Mother is saying that too."

It was faint, sweet consolation, like so many of the utterances of that voice. She had been refusing the importunate, then, as she had done at Dering, and he had still his opportunity. He could not discover her, at first, but soon tracked her to an alcove, where she was talking, idly in her manner, to another woman. This strange fact led his eyes to de Fervolles, who stood at no great distance, flagrantly neglecting the girl at his elbow, Lady Joan.

Claude bowed to Lady Joan, and looked past her companion. Then he waited tranquilly also, for his wife to turn round. She was clearly bent on annoying somebody, for she failed to do so. When the new dance opened, and her neighbour, claimed by a partner, rose to join it, Eveleen remained, her head at the same angle, pouting just visibly, as all the world but herself swung into action again. She looked discontented, if not lonely, at the moment, as a successful hostess should not look. Claude walked into her line of vision carelessly.

"Come on, Evie," he said, as a schoolboy might, holding his arm in a certain manner. He hardly looked at her in speaking: nor was his tone appeal-

ing, rather like a sharp command. If she resented it, or even remarked it was deliberate, he was "done," of course; for the Marquis, and the mischievous Joan just parting from him, were both within ear-shot of the challenge.

She did neither. Eveleen heeded tones and such details very little, if a chance offered to her taste, and he had struck the psychological moment. She had really not perceived him, and his voice startled her a trifle. He copied deliberately an old manner, which she had by heart, so that her actions followed it mechanically. She was bored, as he guessed, and the other man, useful at times, had not learnt when he must let her be before the world; for there were important women present, whose favour she happened to need. He should have known this, of course, without her telling him: as Claude always did.

M. de Fervolles, as a fact, never quite fathomed Eveleen's character. He made the mistake of taking her for a slightly different type of woman much more familiar to him, which she was not.

She rose, her delicate scarves and their delicate scents dropping off her. She hesitated a moment, but only to arrange the long folds of her skirt; and while she stood so at his side, her eyes like his were on the twisting throng. They were a striking and well-contrasted couple, as, in that short interval, the world had leisure to observe. Then they slid into an

opening, with the imperceptible address of natural accord and ancient practice combined, and Eveleen shut her eyes. It was long since she had danced, and longer still since she had paired with Claude, whom she had married, among a few other things, for his dancing, when she was twenty years old. She was barely forty now, and quite as lithe and lovely as ever she had been. She had refused scores of partners during the season past, out of laziness largely: and let herself forget too easily how enchanting the motion was.

“Wait,” she said at last; and he landed her in a sheltered corner, beneath an open window. It was only a minute’s halt for breath-taking, as was evident, for both pairs of eyes were still on the throng, and both, through the veil of that common abstraction, looked markedly elated. The dance changes, as an art, more rapidly than any with the passage of years, but its inner spirit remains the same; and the true worshipper of the goddess, of whatever shade, sex or generation, may be marked by this particular expression.

He made the movement to recommence, and stopped half-way.

“Your brooch is loose,” he informed her, his eyes on the jewel at her breast. Eveleen felt at it, still looking aside, and then frowned, took it off, and stood holding it uncertainly.

"Broken? Let's see," said Claude; and by sheer force of habit, she put the little trinket in his hand. He examined it quickly. It was a beautiful and peculiar stone, in a ring of small diamonds, and nothing that he recognised the least.

"The catch has gone, I'm afraid," he told her. It's useless." And therewith, with a jerk of wrist, he tossed it straight through the open window into the night.

"Claude!" she ejaculated.

Most women would have been furious, but Eveleen was amused. Quite a few times before during their partnership he had shown himself in this mood, and it had invariably amused her. "Elvish," Mr. Gibbs' word, was the nearest that could express it. He had been dull for a long time, but he had evidently waked up. She hardly knew what to expect, and that is stimulating.

"You shall have another to-morrow," he said. "Come on, we're wasting time."

She let him take her down the room again, and they stopped, as chance would have it, fronting de Fervolles and Violet, who were framed in a doorway, and looking bored.

"Father, you absolute abomination!" the girl exclaimed. "This is the fourteenth, the one I kept for you. And you said you were not dancing."

"Well, give me a bit of it," he responded easily.

“De Fervolles won’t mind, and mother will excuse us.”

He said it audibly, in the hearing of a dozen people, and the Marquis could think of nothing whatever to hinder it. The arrangement sounded so friendly and domestic, among this particular group of persons above all, that it was quite inspiring to the ear. So M. de Fervolles had his second partner reft from him, in the course of a single waltz.

“He made love to me,” said Violet softly, when her father had steered her safely out of hearing. “Pique, I suppose, or nothing else to do. I summoned the best French I could to say I detested him.”

Claude looked at her, right in the eyes, but he did not answer at all till he had guided her through the next congested place. Then he remarked absently:

“Does one reverse in these days, Pussy? I forget.”

“What can it matter what *one* does,” scoffed Violet. “Do as you prefer.”

“A fellow doesn’t like to be thought old-fashioned,” he explained. “In that or other things.”

Violet glanced swiftly up at his face. “Not pistols, please,” she said, with a little shaken laugh. “I don’t like them. I mean,—it’s not the ball I mind, it’s the bang.”

"Where's that quotation from?" he demanded, after another short interval, in which he seemed to be considering it.

"A noted dramatist of your era," said Violet. "You ought to know. I'd have found a more *recherché* one, only you frightened me. Take me back to Mother now."

"It's all right," he reassured her. "Here we are."

He brought her into haven at Eveleen's side. De Fervolles, who had been watching their progress with an unwise gloom, rose to make room for her. He had been struck afresh by the elegance of the girl, and the pearls she was wearing had proved, at the close view to which he had treated himself lately, to be magnificent. A big "dot" for this only child was certain; and he was facing his family in France on the morrow, for they had summoned him.

"The Digbys are going, Mother," said Violet, rather breathless on arrival. "I heard them saying so as we passed. I am afraid we ought to begin hovering near the door."

So de Fervolles was deprived even of Mrs. Ashwin's familiar enchantment, and had nothing left him but the disconcerting husband. Luckily, his host had button-holed another "type," the publisher Warden; and they approached de Fervolles, chaffing one another, side by side.

A few minutes later, Dr. Ashwin left the dancing-

room rather hastily, and almost ran into his wife, who was posted just round the curtain, having taken leave of some of the more punctual guests.

"I beg your pardon," he said mechanically.

"Well," said Eveleen, curling her expressive lip.

"Has he accepted?"

Men are such fools,—but yet amusing,—that characteristic expression of hers always said; for Eveleen was quite intelligent in certain situations, though in appearance, she soared above them.

"He accepts, yes," said Claude, making her start. "Warden put it so that he could not escape." He glanced from his watch to the clock in the hall. "That is three minutes fast," he said. "We are due down there in the basement at one. I give him two-fifty out of five."

Eveleen stared at him, for she was no sports-woman, and all varieties of balls,—but one, of course,—bored her deeply. But her daughter overheard, and flushing to the forehead, clasped her hands.

"Oh, oh," she cried, in her most audible clear tone, swerving to the young couples scattered in the hall. "Father has a match with M. de Fervolles on our table at one o'clock, and he is giving him half,—two hundred and fifty in five hundred up. Scratch that extra, Charles,—do you mind? I must absolutely mark for them. Joan, dearest, did you hear

that? Father is quite worth watching, I warn you, when his blood is up."

Lady Joan whistled. "He's a capital player, you know, that Frenchman," she said to the man next her, Mr. Ford. "I saw him take my brother on once, down at Dering. Bill!" She called up, regardless of all forms, to the further sitting-out contingent on the stairs. "I say, Bill! Didn't the Marquis give you thirty out of a hundred at billiards once, and walk over you? Well, what's-his-name, Dr. Ashwin, is offering him two-fifty out of five hundred, to be played off to-night; and I shall jolly well cut Tommy for that extra, and go and see the start."

"Great Scott!" protested an outraged voice above,—for Bill thought himself a very fair player, privately. "I say, you know,—the chap must be off his chump."

"Quite, Mr. Dering," said Violet desolately; and her mother, whose back was turned to the young party, smiled.

"I shall back the French one," said William, more discreetly, to the neighbouring man.

"I'll take you, Dering," called Ford, the secretary, from the hall beneath him.

"Shovell," said Bill, after short parley over the banisters, "will you hold the stakes? I say, Mrs. Ashwin," he added, "I hope you don't mind this. Does she, Miss Ashwin, do you think?"

"It amuses her," said Violet.

Violet was calculating, her eyes on the clock; for the last dance on the regular programme was still due, and she was engaged not only for it, but deep into possible and improbable extras. She looked at the name on her dance-card, and then at Mr. Ford across the ball. Her expression, which Charles observed, was of dim entreaty, though a spark of mischief was also visible.

"Do you mind terribly?" said Violet's glance.

"At your service, and his," said Mr. Ford's. And, while he still talked to Lady Joan, he produced a silver pencil, and drew a careful line through the sixteenth dance on his card.

"How wonderfully perceptive professional people always are," mused Miss Ashwin aloud. "Aren't they, Charles?" She caught his reproachful eyes fixed on her, and moving sylph-like to his side, ran a hand through his arm. Charles could not or would not understand her position with young Ford, the *camaraderie* based on a common artistic taste, almost daily meetings at meal-times, and the personal devotion they shared for the head of the household. This easy alliance,—which disgusted Eveleen, though her husband never mistook it for a moment,—was outside Mr. Shovell's experience, and lacerating (far too obviously) to his feelings, and Violet in her ready sympathy just realised that

it might be so,— hence the hand upon his arm. She dropped it the next moment, as she felt the responsive thrill.

“I am thinking of that Man,” she confided. “Do you happen to know where he is?”

“Not without further information,” said Charles brilliantly. “I notice none of us here seem quite to do, but there are plenty left.”

“Mr. Gibbs was smoking in the little study when I last saw him, Miss Ashwin,” said the intolerable Ford. “About an hour ago. What’s become of him since ——”

“You are unable to guess,” supplied Violet. “Well, I am going, very quietly, to the little study to see. Don’t wait for me, Charles or anybody, will you? At this advanced stage, you see, it may take some time. But I will do my best, and, if not too fearfully grumpy, bring him down.”

Her resources proved equal to the occasion, as usual. An aged and drowsy clergyman, with the best will in the world to be grumpy, got no chance. When Mr. Gibbs joined the party in the basement room, howsoever he may have been discovered by Violet, he was broad awake. Betting was hushed, if not abandoned, at his appearance. He was generally known to be “safe,” and a jolly fellow.

“May I mark, Father?” entreated Violet. “I promise to be careful.”

“No,” he said sharply, for he was nervous. “Not in a match,—you’re interested. Warden will mark.”

“And if I assured you,” said de Fervolles, who was engaged in clearing the table, over his shoulder, “that Mademoiselle has not been interested in this contest, from first to last?”

“I should be obliged to tell you that you lie,” said Claude. He placed the red ball carefully upon its spot.

“Are they going to talk French?” young Dering grumbled. “What that about, Joan?”

“Only twopenny civilities,” said Lady Joan, whose last French governess had departed some time before.

Violet sank down beside her mother, with quivering lips. Then he was fighting for her! She felt she would die, really, if he were beaten now. And yet, being a woman, she might do nothing for him. She had to sit there by Eveleen, and watch this monstrous combat, with clasped hands. She passionately envied her mother at that moment, cool, graceful, and unconcerned,—at least apparently.

“If you are cold, child, fetch a cloak,” said Eveleen; for even she could not fail to observe how the clasped hands near her quivered, and the girl’s whole body too.

Violet shook her head: and, with the usual formalities, the handicap began.

V

CLAUDE FAILS BRILLIANTLY

It started very tamely, as such matches often do. Claude was over-careful, and the whispering of his little audience irritated him. The Marquis' languid air of protest, too, extremely well chosen, drove him beyond himself with fury. His play was nervous, in consequence, and the scoring comparatively slow. M. de Fervolles passed his third hundred long before he touched his first, and seemed to the amateur observation quite a pretty player. Violet was calculating steadily, far more steadily than the betting fraternity; the result of which method was, she ceased despairing, before the honourable Bill began.

For, when the audience least expected it, something changed. Blind justice smiled, or let her scales shift slightly. Claude seized his self-control, and settled into his accustomed manner. After an interval, as he seemed unwilling to stop playing, Violet pushed a chair towards the Marquis.

"Do sit down," she said sympathetically. "He is so tiresomely deliberate. It must be advancing age."

M. de Fervolles omitted to thank her as he obeyed. He was biting his short moustache with visible apprehension. Claude walked about the table, stopping to consider at intervals. He was debarred from recklessness, which he loved: and as Violet observed, took his time. The billiard-balls twinkled obediently to and fro, urged by him and his calculations, meeting occasionally in pleasant little shocks, or shooting into pockets, as if worked, like himself, by springs. By threes and fours and fives, the score crept up meanwhile. He made in that break ninety or thereabouts; and when he finally stopped, the balls were left in cheerless isolation, as though they had said farewell to each other for ever.

The young people applauded vigorously, but Claude was grave. It might have been called by the irresponsible a bedside manner; nor could there be any doubt whose bedside it was. M. de Fervolles rose with a compliment, but he looked rather tired; for he was no fool in the game, and though he still doubled the doctor's score, he foresaw his fate. He walked round to the top of the table, played, and there was a pause.

"*Raté*," said Violet to her father, who had turned to investigate the board. "Go in and win, darling," she added breathlessly. Her mother, overhearing, glanced at her, surprised.

Claude swung about, and saw by his opponent's

face that it was so. The balls lay well for him, and near together.

"A miss," he remarked to Lucas, who had not believed his eyes, or ears. "Are you going, Eveleen?" he added quickly.

"I must, if Violet will not," she said, gathering up her scarf to go upstairs. "Don't be too long," she added calmly. "And turn the lights out, when you come."

The audience stared at her blankly, dumbfounded. Was she human, to leave a match at such a point? But Mrs. Ashwin went, moving sublimely, and her husband opened the door. He was half-smiling as he returned to the table and, going to the balls, proceeded to shepherd them one-handed, in a series of careless little cannons, into the corner.

"Oh, pretty," said Mr. Dering hopelessly, as the red ran suddenly in, and the Marquis' ball trickled down the table. "Why didn't you tell me he was a blooming pro?"—in a wrathful aside to his sister. "You have lost me five pounds by this."

"The only time I saw him, he played with me," Joan murmured. "And I suppose he was missing then on purpose. So like a man!"

Little worth dwelling on happened after this for some time, except that the doctor's score travelled steadily, and M. de Fervolles' did not. Meanwhile, the music of the extra numbers of a prolonged pro-

gramme was perfectly audible overhead. Certain wandering malcontents from the melting crowd above came down to seek their partners, and in each case, remained. Two of these frowning gentlemen sat down at Miss Ashwin's feet; but their frowns cleared simultaneously at a brilliant stroke of the doctor's, and they began to whisper together, useless to surmise of what. Lady Joan's Tommy, at her side, no longer even acted resignation, far less offence. The first awe of the spectators was giving way to amusement, generally.

When he saw his victim in his grasp, close ahead, Dr. Ashwin relaxed his watchful guard, and began to treat himself and the world to a little virtuosity. He did rather foolish things, missing a few he attempted, and scoring some he should not have counted upon simultaneously. He had re-captured his luck, which had not been in attendance at the *début*. Mr. Gibbs and Mr. Warden raised their brows at one another, and some of the young men whistled. He missed at last a comparatively easy chance out of pure heedlessness, and handed the cue-rest across to the Marquis with a laugh.

Then Mrs. Ashwin, having seen the rooms cleared above, returned, bringing a little string of curious guests with her. Spurred by her appearance, *de Fervolles* made a highly creditable twenty, fluked two, and then missed. After that he retired to the

side, for his adversary had decided to make up time.

The master of the house combined his two methods as illustrated in the earlier game, with marked success. He was impeccable, and impossible, and fortunate, and quite ridiculously fast. His elvish blood showed again in some of his attempts, but they all came off. He taught the younger generation how to play billiards,—the noble game his wife called low.

Mr. Gibbs watched him with pleasure that hardly left room for surprise. Triumph, even the smallest, suited Claude like an accustomed air. He looked his best on the crest of a wave of rising excitement. He did not smile, but all his bearing lightened unaccountably. His movements, always forcible and easy, held the eye. It was more than manifest, to the Rector's paternal observation, that half the maidens in the room had lost their hearts to him.

Another person noticed this latter phenomenon also. Eveleen observed her husband curiously, settling even deeper among the velvet cushions of her low seat. Her look said she found him a grotesque person, but she did not divert her gaze to the gallant — and unsuccessful — Marquis. Eveleen detested misfortune, connected with a man. She only wished — still — that Claude would be quick, because she was getting sleepy.

Claude did his utmost to gratify her, as was

obvious; but the merest clown, he would have argued, has to calculate his humorous effects. He was calculating, though at fever-heat,—and though nobody present gave him the slightest credit for it. That is the invariable penalty of adopting giddy ideals, in ordinary things.

Lucas Warden, up to this point serious and dignified as his office demanded, lost his head a little in the last lap of the game; and began to drop little remarks, whenever his friend passed near him, making the girls beyond giggle rather hysterically. Lucas had suffered this treatment so often himself at his present host's hands, that he really enjoyed the spectacle of another's discomfiture. It is to be hoped that Mr. Warden, in this airy mood, scored correctly; but anyhow, Violet was watching him.

“It's not a dissecting-table, Ashwin,” he protested once. “In public, we respect the corpse.”

A little later, struck by the contrast of the player's intent and anxious aspect, with the soaring figures he had just put up, he enquired of those near him —“Who's the man beating now? It's no one here.”

“His own standard,” said Violet.

It reached her father, and he showed that it did so by a gleam, but even then he did not really smile. He ran out amid frantic acclamation, all the little audience on its feet; and, having glanced at the

clock above the chimney, asked mute leave of de Fervolles to finish the break, which was a record, as his daughter guessed. The Marquis, leaning against the wall, made a gesture. Violet also looked in that direction, and saw that he had never learned, in his elaborate education, how to take a beating. His was not even a "brilliant failure," it was a sulky one.

Violet's mother, in the deep seat at her side, had apparently succumbed to its comfort, the tense silence of excitement as the long break approached its close, and the mild heat of the room. The delicate click of the balls was soothing, her husband unusually light of foot, and the hour unmistakably advanced. There was plenteous excuse for a weary hostess; and Eveleen availed herself of all of it.

"Oh, Lord," said Bill Dering, when all was over, and the money had changed hands. "Well, it was worth it! I never saw such a style! It's just flashy, if the board wasn't there to prove you wrong. And how the deuce, looking at him, is a fellow to know?"

"'Who's Who,' would have told you it's his favourite vice," said Charles, who had neither lost nor won, and was consequently calm.

"Did he back himself, do you suppose?" said Bill.

The secretary shook his head. "He told me once he never could: he's so hopelessly self-conscious and downhearted just before. And for the same reason, if I back him, I mustn't let on till it's over. I am going to tell him now."

"What a peculiar card," said William thoughtfully. "Joan, look here: are you ever going to make a move? They must be about sick of us, and Mrs. Ashwin is asleep. . . . I say, keep an eye on that fellow," he added under his breath, as de Fervolles passed them in the general move. "I want to see how he takes it. It's a fairly complete knock-out."

"With the left hand," agreed a neighbouring man who overheard.

"Au revoir, Mademoiselle," said M. de Fervolles, in French, to Violet. "It is an enchantment, the play of M. your Papa. A languorous enchantment, possibly, for those that watch. Madame your mother looks *éreinée*,—tired to death."

"How *generous* of you!" said Violet, her hands clasped carelessly behind her, as she leant against the wall. "*Bon voyage*, Monsieur; I do hope the Channel will behave. . . . Oh, Mr. Ford, good night. What? Well, I call that ignoble of you, profiting by our agony! Oh yes, he prolonged it on purpose to start with,—so *like* him! Going, Joan

dearest? Wasn't it great? Do you terribly mind keeping quiet, for poor Mother? Exhausted, yes: it has been such a strain for us, you know. . . . Oh, hush, Mr. Dering! He has not gone far, and he follows more easily than you'd think."

De Fervolles had not gone far, not even out of hearing. He had moved from her to the left, the press still behind him, and stopped opposite Mrs. Ashwin. He was in embarrassment, evidently, what to do. Eveleen was a lovely spectacle as usual, the black velvet cushions all about her making a perfect frame for her soft hair, and dazzling skin. But she was,—or appeared to be,—asleep; and a guest, even though he should regard himself as a favourite, can hardly go so far as to tread upon his hostess, however dire his need. De Fervolles was in need at that moment, as his expression testified. He could not—would not believe she intended to ignore him, yet he lacked the means to prove whether she did or no. He hung doubtful, wavered, turned, and threw a glance backward. It was most unwise.

"Look at her,—do look!" muttered Joan to her brother in ecstasy.

Yet there was little to see. Miss Ashwin, looking her prettiest, was still leaning carelessly against the whitewashed wall, her hands behind her back, her lashes drooping, her eyes turned sidelong upon

the Marquis' leave-taking. She was pensively silent, and dense silence reigned among her young acquaintance also, the men following the girls, the girls taking the cue from Lady Joan, who had her hand pressed frankly across her mouth. For, as was evident really to the least accomplished observer, an emphatic word, spoken carelessly, might easily have aroused the sleeper. And Violet's circle, charmed to abet her, left that word, by one accord, to be spoken by the Marquis.

M. de Fervolles, prudently perhaps, did not utter it, at least aloud. Feeling was too evidently against him, and retreat was best. His final, much over-acted, scowl at the defaulting daughter of the house was a natural entertainment to her visitors: and his stiff-legged departure, on any less solemn occasion, would have been convulsing. Yet, to the last, not a soul dared express appreciation, or even congratulate the chief actor,—Violet was so graceful and so serious.

"Do you suppose the beast had insulted her?" gasped William, quite overawed, to Joan, as they retired up the room.

"Not a doubt of it," said Joan contemptuously. "Violet is a girl who means all she does always. You can see her meaning it, too."

"Well, they're a sporting gang, and no mistake,"

said Bill, with a long sigh. "Tell you what, Joan," his feelings resolved themselves upon the door-step, "I've seldom, if ever, enjoyed an evening more."

And that was a true echo of the opinion of Bill's world, on Violet's birthday entertainment. The Ashwins were, and remained, sky-high in the general estimation. We will not enquire — we dare not — either how far the opinions so freely interchanged among them, the sympathy so frankly expressed, were just or discriminating; nor how far a delicate national feeling may have crept in amongst youth's mingled sentiments, to spur both the interest and the partisanship on the occasion.

Much later, or rather less early, that night, there was a quiet tap at Violet's door. She went to it, and looked out.

"Father? Nobody ill, is there?" she asked, alarmed.

"May I come in a moment?" he said.

She let him come. He was carrying a small glass, which he laid suggestively on the chimney-piece beside her. She had been leaning there, reading, when he disturbed her. Violet regarded the glass with neither approval, nor distaste. He had discovered that she had not been sleeping lately, and she generally took his prescriptions with an open mind, becoming to the daughter of a celebrity.

Having deposited this excuse for intrusion, he apologised, and dropped himself into a chair, resting his head on his hand.

“No!” Violet exclaimed, “this is not to be borne! Now, listen to me. You ought to see a good doctor, at once. I shall send a friendly line to Mr. Forrest to-morrow.”

“Let me be,” he returned. “It is simply giddiness, resulting from a prolonged mental strain. I have been talking to your mother, Violet.”

Violet’s hand, which had moved to the little glass, dropped at her side.

“I gather,” said Claude, still low, but detaching the words clearly, “more from your mother’s manner than from anything she has said, that your summons to revolt came in time.” Then, dreading lest, by any inadvertence of his, she should fail completely to understand,—“I mean,” he added, “that she did not betray my enforced confidence in her at Dering completely; that she has not given my—our honour completely away.”

He stopped: instantly the girl swung to face him.

“I congratulate you, Father,” she said in his own tone, concentrated and subdued. “How beautifully put,—and how good of you to tell me. Of all the examples of your goodness and courage,” she proceeded, warming, “that have ever come before me, this is the most wonderful, I believe.”

"It is your due," he said.

"Just so," said Violet, still concentrated. "Exactly. But how many fathers in London would have thought so? The doctors at number ten and number twenty-seven would probably have smiled enigmatically, and left their miserable girls to guess." She approached him. "You are not, I regret to tell you, a strong, silent man. Your smiles are perfectly comprehensible, more so than any man's I know. Your behaviour on various occasions, but eminently when you staggered to that chair just now, precludes the possibility."

"What allusion is this?" he enquired, turning his head, still on his hand.

"Nothing," said Violet. "Nothing,—I am raving,—relief. It simply amounts to this, really. There is something in the mastery of our language, after all. I defy Mr. Peacock himself, henceforth, to prove me wrong. Now," she perorated grandly, "I will tell you something in return."

Claude dropped his hand. "Already!" he exclaimed.

"Not already," retorted Violet. "Nothing of the sort. I ought to mention, in summing up your character, Father, you have faults. You are hasty. You expect everybody to live at the same red-hot, quite unreasonable pace as yourself. If you had had the curiosity,—the natural curiosity,—to glance at my programme to-night,——"

"Forgive me, Pussy," he said humbly.

"You would have seen that I gave that gentleman one dance and an extra. And of those, the first I was tired insincerely, and sat out; and the second I abandoned altogether, with a careless excuse, to watch my father playing billiards."

"Forgive me," he repeated. "I retire."

"What I had meant to tell you," said Violet, "was this. I inform you after the event, like Mr. Ford. I have backed you throughout this affair. I never lost the hope you would turn a Brilliant Failure into a Certain Success."

"No, no, not that," he said quickly. "It never can be certain in the circumstances. Demonstrably probable, let us say."

"You hopeless Precisian!" cried Violet, with a little shudder of laughter that brought her head upon her hands, and the tears into her eyes simultaneously. Then, making up her mind to immediate duty, she dropped her hands, seized the little glass, and drank off the contents. From the pinnacle of virtue thus attained, she proceeded to deliver a health-lecture, emphatically worded, and from very close quarters, to the great specialist who had so rashly ventured within her domain.

Claude listened gravely,—content to linger in this little haven of peace and purity, since he knew Eveleen was by now asleep, and the door between their respective rooms shut fast. Only one strand

of his brain was working, but it worked lucidly, he found, on the whole. It struck him, listening, Violet was right, though he failed to follow all her scientific terminology. However, she soared easily in discourse above such trifles. She dealt with social obligations in general, touched on history and the Ashwin device,—so freely translated that he barely recognised it,—glanced gracefully at the little matter of loyalty and his service to the Throne, and entrenched herself upon his duty to the domestic circle — herself, apparently, and Mr. Ford.

That duty, when elaborated by the lecturer, seemed to consist mainly in retaining a certain hour (Claude repeated it to himself) before which he was not to dare to show himself in the morning. He had meant, of course, to say something of the sort to Violet, but it seemed useless now. She would entertain Arthur Gibbs, he understood,—she and Ford. The inclusion of his secretary's name at every juncture was significant. Claude began to fear she and Ford had wasted their sitting-out leisure in criticising him,—a distressful thing to contemplate for the host and head of a household. At least, Violet had got hold of some things that, treachery apart, she should certainly not have known, and he thought he tracked the traitor. He determined vaguely to speak to Ford about this,—when Violet should allow him, of course,—in the morning.

“Sensible, isn’t it?” finished the lecturer vigorously, the tips of her fine fingers touching his head to either side. “In the circumstances, I mean. The circumstances are quite good, properly regarded. The situation promising, for all of us. Now, just go to bed and think it over, do you mind?”

He nodded, still grave. He really could not think of anything to say to her, sweet as she was. Nor could he rise. He supposed,—diagnosing himself with conscious clarity,—that the effort of circumventing Eveleen, slippery, impenetrable, mercilessly seductive, had really left him a little dazed. He had not attacked, he had been frankly too weary, after the almost superhuman effort of the day; it was she who, with the instant of her insatiable kind, had sought to entwine him again. He had been roused to resistance in self-defence, and had learnt all he cared to know of past history—granted always she was not lying,—on the way. He had gathered up that evidence for the girl’s reassurance chiefly, it could mean little to himself now. He had released himself finally from her coils, with the aid of words he had not chosen,—brutal words, he supposed, since she had understood,—but he felt stung. Mortally or not, in the resulting languor he could not say. He felt it more under the charm of this little dry voice, and the touch of delicate hands on his brow. After that other scene, those words spoken

certainly by his voice, for he heard them still, Violet ought not to touch him, of course. Yet she did, persistently,— he could not but wonder if she knew.

“Go, darling,” said Violet, after the long pause, very low. “Leave me,— you must. *I am so tired.*”

It spurred him, and he sprang erect. She had found perhaps the one phrase in the world that would have done so, for the habit of service is strong. He apologised, picked up the glass quite mechanically, and left her. She clung to the mantelshelf, forcing herself fiercely, furiously, not to cry till he was gone.

VI

CONCLUSION

MR. GIBBS was not so "hasty" by temperament as his brother-in-law, and it was April before he again thought it necessary to take stock of his stepson's love-affair. At that period of the year's festival, when enchanting Dickens-land was looking its best, and all the Glasswell cherry trees were wearing white for Easter-tide, Mr. Joliffe brought a party down to the Rectory for the inside of a day, consisting of Charles and Violet, and another young gentleman with whom Miss Ashwin was temporarily in love. This may need a little explanation.

Mrs. Eccles took longer than was expected to recover from the operation, and it was not until March that Alice and her husband were able to send her to Holybrook Farm, near Barnstaple, where Abel's mother, who was Alice's friend, had long been waiting to receive her. Mrs. Eccles was in such terror of Dr. Ashwin (who had treated her abominably) that during the whole of that long interval she had abstained from excesses, and was considerably better, morally and physically, in consequence.

But Alice knew her too well to trust her long; and towards Easter she was allowed by her husband to go down for a week, and breathe the country air, and renew her old acquaintances at the farm. She talked a great deal to her mother-in-law during this short visit, and on her return to London, left her mother behind her in Mrs. Peacock's charge without scruple, bringing Mrs. Peacock's youngest son Christopher to Wimbledon in Mrs. Eccles' stead.

Alice had of course foreseen that Abel would resent his brother's presence a little on the domestic hearth; especially as Kit was an imp, and ten times cleverer than he. Alice herself thought well to look aside when Kit was cuffed occasionally, though she loved him as devotedly as ever, and took most competent charge of him at home. Abroad it was more difficult to do so, for she was much tied to the house. Alice had left Lennoxes perforce on her marriage, but she plied her chosen trade indefatigably in the intervals of keeping house for Abel, and earned very nearly as much as he did, though he was prospering. For she was now regularly employed by the great Mrs. Ashwin, who was trusting herself and her worldly credit more and more, as time went on, to Mrs. Peacock's capable hands. Thus Alice lost nothing material by the change from Lennoxes, and Mrs. Ashwin gained enormously: for she paid less and looked better than ever she had done. She

gained also in other ways, as Eveleen could be trusted to gain; for, being pestered on all sides by her acquaintance for the address of her new discovery, she held quite a number of useful people in play by withholding it; reserving it, doubtless, with perfect commercial instinct, for the best offer, later on.

Mrs. Ashwin's daughter, meanwhile, was working daily in the studio at Miss Lennox's side, though both she and Miss Lennox lost sadly, in different ways, by Alice's dissociation from the business. Failing Alice, Violet undertook the management of Miss Lennox and her affairs with an address less conspicuous, but quite as remarkable in its way. Miss Lennox was persuaded to extravagances in the matter of space and furnishing, of which the long-lamented Miss Moffat would certainly have disapproved. But Miss Ashwin's purse and personality, in combination, constituted a reinforcement in life of which Miss Lennox had never ventured, in Miss Moffat's day, even to dream; and in her wondering appreciation of present good, the faithfully adorned image of Miss Moffat was being gently blotted, day by day, from Miss Lennox's tenacious mind. The fact that the former partner had ceased altogether to answer her letters may possibly have contributed to this phenomenon.

Since Violet's breakdown in the autumn, however,

and the short and singular letter from her father to the head of the firm that ensued upon it,—entirely devoted, as Miss Lennox explained to Mrs. Gibbs, to the acutest financial advice concerning the accounts that had been submitted to him, and only alluding to Violet once, in an amusing postscript,—Miss Lennox had kept a very tender watch upon the girl, and, as Easter approached, insisted on her taking “a real holiday.” Violet, espying profitable employment in another quarter, submitted tamely to authority for once; and thereupon, since Alice was what she termed “off colour” and keeping the house, Violet received at her hands sole charge of Kit in the afternoons, with the avowed intention of showing him the sights of London.

It is quite doubtful if any thoroughly undeserving young scamp ever enjoyed such a wonderland before, as that to which Miss Ashwin and Joliffe in combination introduced him. Quite a new side of London life, already intensely interesting to a country youth, became apparent to Kit’s intelligent mind; and, his ambition fired instantly, he used his patroness mercilessly for his purposes; forcing her to do about twice what she had intended, every day. Joliffe seized every opportunity to snub him sharply on the sly, but it was useless. Kit at fourteen hardly recognised a snub, and, as he was deeply interested in Joliffe and his work, found it more convenient to

ignore his disapproval, and court him diligently. He sat beside Joliffe on the front seat all the way down to Glasswell; and the pair behind were in ecstasies at the cool assumption, conveyed to them by the breeze at intervals, in his remarks.

Violet had bade Margery get out her materials to paint her protégé; for Kit was exactly like a Romney picture without, whatever he may have been like within; but she reckoned without the model, who declined the honour promptly, and escaped. Kit did not at all see the sense of frittering away even half an hour of the time granted him in such a place. As a fact, he saw everything, and was served by all. He broke Mr. Gibbs' heart by thinking nothing of the garden, saying that Abel's at Wimbledon was far better, and that if Mr. Gibbs would be at a certain rendezvous at a certain time, Kit himself would conduct him over it. He took in the church in silence, for he had been well brought up, appearing meek and looking saintly. But on emerging from the porch, he was holding a dead mouse by the tail, which he discovered, he explained to his hostess, down by the organ. It was Kit's opinion that the organist (Mrs. Gibbs) might have killed it unintentionally with her feet during service the day before. It was quite a long time before the Rector's wife,—who concealed a weak-minded disgust for mice,—played that organ in comfort again.

Thus much of Kit. To sum him up, he attracted, with the least possible effort, such a large measure of attention, that the proceedings of Charles and Violet could hardly be observed at all. There seemed little to observe indeed, the girl fitted her usual place in the scene so perfectly, unless it were the marked absence of all Charles' accustomed buoyancy. The Rector even wondered in private if she overrated his capacity for persistence, for his depression was obvious, even on the subject of his work, where he need have had no doubts: and he looked older and harassed to his sisters' eyes.

As for his mother, if she knew more of his state of mind, she kept her counsel. It is probable she did, for her son rarely came down to Glasswell in these days without a private interview: which Mrs. Gibbs never sought on her own account, letting Charles, in his own absent and erratic fashion, discover the necessity.

"Isn't she straining him unnecessarily?" the Rector asked her cautiously that night.

"On the contrary," the mother answered at once, "she'll snap first, if this goes on. I warned her,—but she only laughed."

The dog Erasmus who, having investigated Kit in his manner, recognised a relationship to his long-lost Peacock, thereafter stuck to him like wax. At parting he made wild efforts to follow Kit into the

carriage, in spite of bulk, and age; and both the pretty Miss Gibbises had to wreath their arms about him, and appeal to his oldest affections in heart-breaking terms, before he would stir from the step. Margery kissed his head repeatedly as well, but Bob Brading looked on at it unmoved; and made in succession, for Miss Ashwin's benefit, absolutely the only correct and sensible remarks that were made on the premises that day. For Robert, in Charles' absence, had become for all practical purposes the son of the house. Kit threw Erasmus the mouse (which he had kept) to console him, and the party started home.

Half-way home in the spring twilight, while Kit slept peacefully in the corner, Charles captured Violet's hand, including by degrees her arm as far as the elbow, for he had come unrighteously close, and asked her if she had no pity, and if he might not speak.

"Just as you like," said Violet. "But I should not advise it, really." She leant, looking at the white cherry trees through the dusk with her bright elvish eyes.

"Of course you can talk me down," said Charles. "I never doubted that." He halted miserably.

"Didn't you?" said Violet. "Not ever so long ago in that canoe? Think, Charles. You had so much to tell me then."

“Only because you helped me,—I mean, your eyes.”

She laughed a compliment to his eloquence: then, since he did not see fit to release her, frowned. But she did not draw her arm away, for he was panting a little, and Violet had a high-bred horror of struggles. He let her hand go at last, having kissed it furiously; and she withdrew, dainty skirts and all, away from him, and nearer to the sleeping child.

Altogether on that day the net results arrived at were Bob Brading's bet to his fiancée (utterly indefensible, of course) that Shovell would not bring it off within the year; and Joliffe's opinion, delivered weightily to the servants' hall at Harley Street, that Miss Violet was backing away, if anything: and that personally he did not see why that young Shovell need think himself so much better than other people, anyhow.

That young Shovell did not, by slow degrees. He had months of instruction before him. In early May, Miss Ashwin was presented at Court, and Charles heard nothing of it till, the following day, he overheard her remark to an acquaintance that the poor Man had looked so tired, that Father said he had just risen from a sickbed of influenza, and that She, in Violet's opinion, ought to have prevented it. Then he realised, with a shock, that she was really out, launched well in the forefront on the

stream of the summer season, that retirement and Lennoxes were things of the past, and that, do as he would, he could not keep her from other men.

The summary after that serious event had better be rapid. In May, Mr. Gibbs wrote to his brother-in-law as follows:

“MY DEAR CLAUDE,

“This won’t do, you know. You must get your young party to be more gentle, because ours shows signs of wear. The boy really has a sensitive constitution, as she does not seem to realise, and feels her shafts more than she knows. You quivered people should be careful, sharp words can do such harm. I do not want to blame anybody, but it looks a shade vindictive at this stage, and if he comes to suspect that — *gare à elle*. These warnings for your common good, and now it’s over.

“Smirks, by the way, upon the Birthday List. How many times, Claude, have I congratulated you, but never with my present insincerity. All the correct things to Lady Ashwin too. I hope she is satisfied now, but I gather from your last she thinks you can do better if you try. Meanwhile, *she* tries — others.

“N. B.—I have the happy notion of marking these observations Private, to escape the researches of Ford.”

Sir Claude Ashwin replied — most improperly — on a postcard:

“Thanks. Go to the devil.— C.”

And that little correspondence closed.

In June, Violet took tea with Mr. Lucas Warden, and, as Mr. Warden was fully persuaded, listened to reason. At any rate she kissed him at parting, a thing which she had never done before, and thanked him charmingly too. Only she returned home to treat Charles just as before, with even greater concentration, if possible.

Later in June, Miss Ashwin met a Cabinet Minister at a garden-party, and was blest with his fascinating conversation — *vide* the best books,— for the space of an hour, on the terrace of a country house. This fact got abroad, much was made of it, and everybody who knew anything about anything, commiserated Charles. He was in anguish until it became known, that Miss Ashwin had not only not refused the right honourable gentleman, but that she had never even been asked to marry him. He simply proceeded upon his starry course with a lastingly higher opinion of the feminine intelligence: which everyone may hope, did him and his Cabinet good.

All the autumn, Violet was away, in houses to which Charles was not invited. Only for a few fleeting hours of a September day, they met at Glasswell, coming from opposite directions to fulfil their

offices as bridesmaid and groomsman at the Brading wedding. On this occasion, regarding herself, it may be, rather officially than as a private person, Violet behaved to him with such gentle and absent decorum, that Charles lost his head completely, and was perhaps the least competent "best man" of all who have ever been called upon to take the post. In fact, he was prompted by Sir Robert, the whole time. Margery bade Violet, with her parting kiss, "be kind to Charlie"; and it is doubtful if Margery was thinking solely of her bet in doing so.

In November, he saw her again, and was an occupant of the car the day she went down to Wimbledon, to visit young Mrs. Peacock's baby. Charles would have thought, had he at this stage been able to think anything against her, that she might have let him off this ordeal. She did so to the extent of leaving him in the car, for she wanted to talk to Alice; but Alice, pale but beautiful inconceivably, with her son in her arms, and Abel beaming behind, came to the door to see Violet off; and for a moment Charles, who had shrunk from Alice for a year past, was forced to view the whole. At the moment when he did so, he thanked Heaven as man must for granting him an unequalled spectacle; and thereafter he never shrank, even in thought, again.

"I *do* congratulate you, Mr. Peacock," said Violet on the doorstep. "Do you really think your Father

down at Holybrook could hold out? Might you not try — one of your nice letters? I am sure it is just the very moment now.” Which it proved.

The evening of the same day, Violet laid herself along her father’s chair, in the half-light of the hall, and told him quietly about Alice, and Peacock, and the baby, and how they were like a certain Venetian picture of a certain group of three; and how Mrs. Eccles was teasing Alice in her weakness with hateful, selfish reminiscences of the boy who died; and other things, for the medical ear alone, that in that company she need not fear to say. When she withdrew from him in the dusk she was crying; but Claude, in deep reflection, did not realise that until Eveleen joined him, and reproached him sharply with his folly in spoiling Violet’s appearance on an occasion of importance,— for they were going out.

Dr. Ashwin went down in his turn to Wimbledon the following day, chose,— out of pure perversity — a Florentine picture for the group; and set things right among them in this manner, without error or delay.

Late on New Year’s Eve, to make a story that grows long too short,— for all the intervening incidents were notable of their kind,— Charles, on his Christmas visit to Glasswell, at the very tail of his holiday and of his hopes as well, succeeded at length

in ensnaring his elfin lady, and in bringing her to bay. It occurred, this crowning incident of all romance, in Margery's little study under the roof, whither Miss Ashwin had retired with a large book on astronomy and a chart of the winter heavens, to watch the stars. It was a rivalry, to the last, for which Charles was not prepared: indeed his sisters warned him earnestly not to disturb her in such company. But he went, and by his passionate persistence succeeded in diverting her attention from them finally; getting her promise in terms which,—if astronomical,—could leave, thanks to the Ashwin instinct, no instant's doubt upon his troubled mind.

Thus he won Violet,—and lost Sir Robert Brad-
ing his bet in the same neat stroke, scoring both in a tumult of self-approval and towering exultation, which no succeeding arguments of Bob's, that the bet was lost by forty minutes only, could in the smallest degree disturb.

It was all most triumphantly satisfactory, from every point of view; but there was a side to the crowning incident, all the same, that should not be omitted.

“I only wanted to tell you,” said Miss Ashwin, standing just inside Mrs. Gibbs' door, “that Charles came up there and interrupted me, while my mind was in other things, and so I am afraid I capitulated by inadvertence,—before I knew where I was.”

"Indeed?" Mrs. Gibbs sat down with decision on the sofa. "Come here, you absurd little shy thing," she said, "and tell me about it properly." Violet closed the door and advanced. She touched a chair, passed it dubiously, and sat down on the other end of her aunt's sofa, smoothing her skirts nicely, before she clasped her knees. She was still blinking a little, since she came from the dark, and she looked very white to Mrs. Gibbs' eyes, as though she had caught some of the pallor of the long-dead worlds she had been watching so long.

"It was like this," she explained to her hostess with propriety. "I had been reading that fat book of Robert's on astronomy all day, full of new, rather thrilling things. And I went to Margery's room to-night, where the atmosphere is pleasantly studious, and helpfully dark, to think some of them out. Quite-new things are rather stiff, you know. I had not expected — what I may call — still newer things, just then. That was all. Charles is so unexpected, isn't he?" She put her hand vaguely to her brow.

"Are you quite well, my dear?" said Mrs. Gibbs. She felt she dared not touch her, at the moment.

"Oh, quite. I only came in here, on my way downstairs, to explain."

"Why did not Charles?" said his mother.

"Oh, he would have, only he wanted to rush and

tell them,—the bet, you know. He is terribly pleased about it.” She hesitated. “But I thought you ought to hear first of all. Besides, my late proceedings may have seemed rather remarkable, to some of you. I often wondered, Aunt Henrietta, if you understood ——”

“Why not Mamma?” said Mrs. Gibbs.

“Oh, may I?” Violet lifted her delicate brows, and then her eyes. Then the white, wild look changed, and she fell upon Charles’ mother’s shoulder, and cried there for a long time, quite desperately. Mrs. Gibbs, confident that she had never felt a mother’s arms before,—which was the simple fact,—held her jealously close, and would hardly abandon possession later even for the Rector, far less for Charles. She was certain now of what she had acutely guessed, that the girl had been infinitely nearer to the breaking-point than the man; only, as always with an Ashwin, one could never tell, the pose was held so successfully,—until they broke.

Violet insisted on leaving them next day, though entreated by her cousins, and practically commanded by Mrs. Gibbs, to stay at Glasswell and rest. She could not, they gathered, possibly let poor Charles walk straight into the gaping jaws of Harley Street alone. She intended at least to accompany him to the brink of the ordeal, and had already warned Father, by post, to be provided with adequate leisure

and the right tone of voice. These measures, she assured them all at the breakfast-table, were strictly advisable in the circumstances: not that Father did not like Charles immensely, of course: but he was a trifle arrogant nowadays, not quite, in the matter of temper, what he once had been, and pounced unpleasantly when not prepared.

“You’d rather I came, wouldn’t you, Charles?” She finished. And Charles said shamelessly that he would. He added, in order finally to exasperate his sisters, that the air would be good for Violet. It may be that he wished to wipe out the memory of a former drive to London,—but that was no excuse, in the eyes of Maud and of Margery Brading, who did not know of the incident, and only saw Violet’s present exhaustion. So they all quarrelled till the last minute—except Robert—as usual. Robert merely shook hands with Miss Ashwin on the doorstep, very hard: and lent her the fat book on astronomy, by request, in case she should happen to be bored on the way to town.

“I am engaged to Mr. Shovell, Joliffe,” Violet observed gravely to that functionary, as she was getting into the car.

“I wish you happiness, Miss Violet, indeed,” said Joliffe. “I congratulate you, sir.” He marked, beyond any question, by the gathering fervour of his

tone, which of the pair he thought was being blest by fate.

And Charles was so blest, as a fact, that he forgot to reckon by any ordinary measure how blest he was. For it was only when Claude Ashwin mercifully terminated the most frightful interview of his life, that he realised fully, for the first time, that his match with his beloved made him a wealthy man. Of any other hero than Charles we should despair of having this believed; but Violet's father, who was watching his face, believed it, and we give that evidence for what it is worth.

On the subject of the ceremony, there were storms. Mr. Gibbs was the most eloquent,—lofty, indeed, in tone.

“Charles,” wrote Mrs. Gibbs, “who points out to me that marriage only occurs once or twice in one's whole career, is in favour of being as fashionable as possible, and knocking out Brading, whose business last autumn seemed to Charles below the average. Well, you say Violet agrees with Charles; and that, since you agree with Eveleen, all wits jump. And that consequently, a London show next month is the thing to make for. . . . *Claude, I remember it!* Distrust appearances. Don't you be taken in. Go at her, get behind her, worry her little life

out till she confesses. She is letting Charles go easy, because she has used him hard. She is *not* of his opinion,—shouldn't I know? Didn't she tell me in this room, in these arms, before she ever left me, what she wants? She wants to be married quietly at Glasswell, by her uncle; and who, I ask you, should do it better, and what house should be fitter than his? It is a very jolly house, and the peas promise finer than ever, and so does the hay. So don't you and Eveleen trouble to come, if you are taken up. You can trust the job to me. I have practised on heaps of couples, including my own maid, now a Lady, who will recommend me."

Of course she was married at Glasswell finally, and of course her parents came down, and a large and fashionable concourse followed them. The village hummed with motor-traffic, and even by adherents of the Rectory family, "Miss Margery's last year" was admitted to be far outclassed. Lady Ashwin, magnificent and cool, arrived unattended by any save Alice Peacock and her own husband: which fact considerably surprised the world, until the reason for it came to light. Eveleen had a grudge against Claude for submitting, against her expressed wish, to the tiresome folly of a country wedding; and had doubtless been seeking in her leisurely mind on the way to Glasswell, how best to humiliate him and spoil the general entertainment.

“I may as well tell you, my dear,” said Alice as she dressed the bride, “your mother’s nasty. It’s not likely you’ll get a chance at him, the state she’s in. Coming along, I couldn’t even say I was obliged to him; though I was, as usual, several times.”

It was as Alice acutely predicted. Eveleen did what such a naturally conspicuous person could, to wet-blanket her daughter’s festival, but, not being in her own house, did not succeed. In spoiling the pleasure of her own small family, however, she succeeded perfectly. Claude said a series of happy things on the occasion, in a perfectly expressionless tone, and put a high polish on the ceremony by supplying, in his own person, details which all the other officials forgot. He gave his daughter in church to Charles,—whom he also saved, by an adroit stimulus, from fainting at the critical moment,—rescued her train and flowers from destruction in the *mélée*, and watched her closely to the very last. But his wife seemed to have sworn in advance to all her gods, immortal and otherwise, that he should get no word in private with Violet before she left. The whole indignant household would have abetted him, had he shown fight for the mother’s privilege he certainly could have claimed, but he made no serious resistance.

Irreproachable and easy to the last, he lifted the little bride, shivering with the unnatural tension of

such a parting, into her place in the carriage, kissed her lightly once, and left her, with a gesture, in Charles' hands to care for. Then, returning home with Eveleen, he put the rest on paper that same night.

It was one of his short "scrawls," conscious and concentrated in manner like everything to which he ever set his name. It lost nothing by that. Matching perfectly in tone the high moment of her life to which he destined it, it could not be quoted in its entirety. But we may betray the close, since it witnessed to his knowledge of his daughter, a knowledge which serves her tale.

"Good-bye, my star," he wrote. "You have played the first act bravely, may you play the next under better skies. I have faith in the man you have chosen, if for no other reason, because I have seen how you watched him all this year. In the racking moment, I imagine it is generally upon the woman that the burden of judgment must fall; and that is how the double happiness is made, or missed.

"Yours, as ever,

"C. C. A."

That was the issue, at least, of one great scientist's philosophy.



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